

May Day 2022: The significance of anti-government popular protests in Sri Lanka and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party

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This is the report delivered by Deepal Jayasekera to the 2022 International May Day Online Rally held on May 1. Jayasekera is the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka. To view all speeches, visit wsws.org/mayday.

Every bourgeois government in South Asia is engulfed by the immense economic, political and social crisis of global capitalism, highly intensified by the more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic and the present US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

As part of an international upsurge of the class struggle, the workers, youth and rural toilers throughout South Asia have entered into struggle, including strikes and mass protests against the ruling class onslaught on their basic social and democratic rights, which is placing the full burden of the economic crisis on them.

India has been caught up in the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine, with intensified pressure from Washington on Delhi to break its decades-long ties with Moscow and closely line up with the US against Russia, as in the US-India military-strategic partnership against China. The US-NATO war drive against Russia, with its associated harsh sanctions on Moscow and the resulting breakdown of the global supply chain, has severely intensified India's economic crisis.

In this situation, the working class and rural toilers in India are entering into struggle against increased attacks on their social and democratic rights by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Several million workers participated in the March 28-29 general strike.

In Sri Lanka, the global crisis of capitalism finds its sharpest expression. Growing popular protests throughout the island demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse have shaken the government to the core. Since April 9, thousands have engaged in continuous protests, day and night, at the main protest site at Galle Face Green, in

central Colombo. These mass protests have been triggered mainly by widespread anger over shortages of essentials like fuel, cooking gas and medicines, skyrocketing prices and hours-long daily power outages.

Working people, youth, professionals and the rural poor are united in this popular uprising, which cuts across all linguistic and religious communal lines—Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian—defying decades-long reactionary efforts by all sections of ruling class to whip up communalism to divide and weaken the working class.

Now, the mass protests have reached a turning point, with the working class deciding to intervene. On April 25, about 250,000 teachers throughout the island joined a one-day strike demanding the resignation of the Rajapakse government. Three days later, millions of workers all over the country joined a one-day general strike with the same demand.

This intervention on the part of the working class has further deepened the political crisis confronting the Rajapakse government. The government is hanging by a thread, effectively losing its majority in parliament, with 40 of its members announcing that they will act “independently” in the future.

Desperate to cling to power, the Rajapakse government is biding its time and plans to unleash a brutal police-military repression against the mass uprising. On April 11, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, in an “address to the nation,” issued a thinly veiled threat to anti-government protesters that his government will launch a brutal crackdown if they fail to end their campaign.

Just eight days later, a heavily armed police battalion opened fire on thousands of people protesting against fuel price hikes in Rambukkana, killing one worker, Chaminda Lakshan, and injuring dozens more. This shooting is a clear warning to working people and rural toilers and also an obvious signal to investors and global bankers that the

government is prepared to crush any popular opposition to its harsh austerity measures.

As with the government, the opposition bourgeois parties are terrified that the current anti-government uprising will develop into a militant movement challenging bourgeois rule as a whole. Sections of the ruling class and main parliamentary opposition parties, the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), are working to trap dissent within capitalist rule through the formation of an interim government, which will definitely continue with same IMF-dictated austerity measures, further worsening the conditions confronting the working people and rural toilers.

In this situation of the government's preparations for a brutal crackdown and opposition parties' interim government trap, the anti-government popular movement faces a grave danger flowing from its lack of a clear political perspective and program to fight bourgeois rule, despite its determination and militancy. This has been clearly shown by the list of demands published by the organizers of the Galle Face protests as the "alternative," rejecting the Prime Minister's April 13 offer for talks with them.

While demanding the resignation of Gotabhaya and Mahinda Rajapakse, they have advocated an interim government formed from the existing parliament, excluding anyone from the Rajapakse family; empowerment of the 19th amendment to the constitution, which had made cosmetic changes to some powers of the widely hated executive presidency; a mechanism for taking back all the wealth plundered by members of the Rajapakse family and their associate officials; and holding presidential and general elections within a six-month period.

Galle Face protest organizers, while promoting "no politics," are actually advocating politics similar to bourgeois parliamentary opposition—the SJB and JVP—which are exploiting popular anger against the government to bring an alternative capitalist government to power, which will not only not resolve any of the burning issues confronting the working people, but will makes them worse. The ruthless demands of global finance capital will not be lessened but further intensified in the near future.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is actively intervening in this popular movement, advocating an independent working class revolutionary socialist program and perspective.

As elaborated in its statement on April 7, the SEP, while standing "squarely behind the demands of working people: 'Gota has to go!'" raises this demand: "What is to replace him? It is not enough to demand Rajapakse's removal... [A]s a key step in addressing the current political crisis, the SEP demands the immediate abolition of the executive

presidency, which, with its sweeping autocratic powers, holds a gun to the heads of the working class."

The SEP is proposing that the working class fight for the establishment of a government of workers and peasants that will be committed to socialist policies. Such a government will be established through independent organs of the working class. Our proposal to the working people is to form their own action committees at every factory, workplace, plantation and neighborhood, breaking from the trade unions, which are acting as an industrial police force against workers on behalf of the government and employers.

The SEP statement on April 7 has proposed a "program and policies to animate the work of the Action Committees to address the pressing needs of the masses," including the repudiation of the debt of the small farmers, fishermen, small industrialists and businessmen; for workers' "democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential items and other resources critical for the lives of people"; to "nationalize the banks, big corporations, plantations and other major economic nerve centers"; to "repudiate all foreign debts;" and to say, "no to the austerity demands of the IMF and World Bank."

The fight of the Sri Lankan working class, rallying poor farmers and other oppressed masses, for a government of workers and peasants based on socialist policies is part of a broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally, to be conducted with the unity of their class brothers in South Asia and globally.

Build the International Committee of the Fourth International in South Asia!



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