

Sri Lankan SEP discusses socialist program with Colombo protesters on May Day

Our reporters
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Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka campaigned among the protesters gathered on Galle Face Green in central Colombo on May Day, the day of international working-class solidarity.

The central demand of the protests is the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. Thousands are gathering daily at Galle Face from around the country. On some days the number is up to ten thousand or more. Protests are also being held in every major city on the island with the participation of thousands of people.

The protest movement began early April in response to intolerable living conditions as the government is heaping the burden of the country's deep economic crisis onto working people. The prices of essentials including food and medicine are increasing daily and shortages are rampant. Fuel supplies have been drastically cut creating long queues at distribution centres. Electricity supplies are limited every day by long hours of load shedding. People are demanding an immediate end to this dire situation.

On International May Day, there was a larger than usual participation in the Galle Face protests. The Free Trade Zone and General Workers Union and Ceylon Mercantile Union ended their May Day marches at the Galle Face Green where union leaders demagogically denounced President Rajapakse and his government and called for its ousting.

The same union leaders are silent about what will be the next government. They are indirectly backing the formation of an interim government based on the main opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—that will, like the current government, impose drastic new austerity measures.

At the same time, the trade unions are desperate to prevent the outbreak of independent action by the working class against the government. All these unions betrayed the strikes and protests over the past two years involving hundreds of thousands of workers for higher wages and improved conditions.

Unions also support the insistence of the Galle Face Green

protest organisation that no politics are allowed in the agitation site. However, they are also calling for an interim regime, in reality, another capitalist administration that will certainly carry out IMF dictated austerity policies.

The protests at Galle Face Green have drawn in Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, youth and rural toilers from across the island, cutting across communal hostilities routinely whipped up by Colombo politicians to divide the working people. Present on May Day were people from Vavuniya, Batticaloa and Monaragala—all several hundred kilometres from Colombo.

SEP and IYSSE members distributed the party's statement which has elaborated a socialist program for action to address the social crisis to mobilise the independent strength of the working class and rally youth and the rural poor masses. The program calls for building workers' action committees independent of the unions and all capitalist parties.

Campaigners displayed slogans including: "Bring down the Rajapakse government! Abolish executive presidency! Bring in a workers' and peasants' government! Build workplace action committees! Join international alliance of workers' rank-and-file committees! Oppose the imperialist war!"

The SEP members held numerous discussions with workers and youth.

Kithsiri, a carpenter from Hasalaka in Mahiyanganaya about 200 kilometres from Colombo, said: "I thought of coming here at least one day to give our support to youth who have spoken for us for a number of weeks. Our situation is so much more difficult now. Our family cannot make ends meet with my small earnings.

"We even cannot have three meals a day. It is very much difficult to provide food and clothing for my children," he said, adding that sometimes he privately cried because he was unable to provide what his children were asking for.

"The prices of goods are going up rapidly. We are forced to ask for increased wages. People who give us work are facing the same problems and cannot pay the amounts we

ask. All of us are in a mess.

“Although I do not have much political knowledge, I feel that we will face the same problems with any government that will come to power through the parliamentary system. I am telling this based on the experience of my life. My question is who will make up the government after sending Gota [President Rajapakse] home.”

A machine operator, who came to the protest with a group of workers from the Uniform Experts Garment factory in the suburbs of Colombo, criticised all the political parties. “It is not only [President] Rajapakse but all 225 [members of the parliament] that should be sent home,” she said.

“I know that our problems will not be resolved under a government of either Sajith Premadasa of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya or Anura Kumara Dissanayake of Jathika Jana Balavegaya [a JVP-led front].

“All these parties have been represented in parliament. They did nothing except raise their hands for government’s vicious proposals. We cannot hope for any more even if they again come to power.”

She said that about 200 workers were employed at her factory and the garments produced there were exported to Canada. “One dress we make is sold at high prices. The businessmen involved in garment production reap huge profits. But our monthly salary is just a pittance of 35,000 rupees [US\$99].

“Now the dollar value [of the garments] has gone up. So, the revenue of the factory owners in Sri Lanka is even higher. But our salary has not been increased by a cent and no incentives are given. The government does not protect us. It protects the companies. So, even if another group outside the parliament comes to power, it is also useless.”

Sundararaj Gnanasekaram, an estate worker from Nawalapitiya, said: “I came here to express my opposition to the Rajapakse government, other capitalist parties and the trade unions. Now I am retired. I received my Employees Provident Fund but it vanished within months. Now it is very difficult to survive. My line-room gets severely wet. Estate managers do not provide us with decent housing.

“None of the union leaders came to see us after the last election [in plantations, unions function as political parties and their leaders contest elections]. All the trade unions are the same. They do not represent us. They are with the companies. New unions were formed. But they are also doing the same.”

As the prices of goods were skyrocketing, he said that surviving is utterly difficult and most of the estate families do not eat three meals a day.

Taking his national identity card from his pocket, he said: “I want to say something about a problem that we have been facing throughout my life time. Here it is mentioned that my

father was Indian Tamil. I was born in Sri Lanka. Why is there such discrimination? Even 74 years after independence, this problem still persists. The problems we are facing have increased.”

Just after formal independence from British colonial rule in 1948, the Colombo government rammed through a bill abolishing the citizenship rights of Indian-origin Tamil workers. It was done to disenfranchise a million plantation workers and to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism. Though citizenship rights were finally re-established—after many had been forced to leave for India, discrimination against estate workers continues.

Shehan Gunawardena, a worker from Wellawaya, about 250 kilometres from Colombo, explained why he had come to the Galle Face: “My friend and I came here to participate in the protest believing that this agitation would help to address our problems. I live by doing day to day work, earning a daily wage of 1,500 rupees. With the way of prices going up, that is utterly inadequate for us to live on.”

He explained that he was still unmarried and lived with his mother. He was worried how to pay for the medicine needed for his ailing mother.

“I cannot see that those who lead these protests have a solution to our problems. They only chant that ‘Gota go.’ But at the same time the prices of goods and fuel are going up. The government is determined to suppress the campaign. Already one person has been killed. The killers have not been punished.”



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