

The way forward for striking Sri Lankan workers

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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Millions of Sri Lankan workers will participate in the one-day general strike to be held tomorrow, following a similar strike last Thursday.

Unions have announced Friday's action as a "hartal" (a general strike and shutdown of businesses) and called on all people to support it. Unions will call another one-day strike on May 11, as part of their efforts to deflect seething mass anger.

These strikes will embrace the entire working class while more oppressed layers of the population, including the rural and urban poor as well as small businessmen, are expected to join.

Millions are demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government and an end to the social catastrophe being heaped on them by the Rajapakse regime and the entire ruling class.

The intervention of the working class in Sri Lanka is significant and welcome. It is part of the class struggles sweeping across the globe, including in Sudan, Iran, Peru, Turkey and India, to name a few countries. Strikes and protests are also emerging in major capitalist centres, including the US and Europe.

Workers in all these countries are up in arms against the assault on their living conditions with skyrocketing inflation, and the slashing of wages and jobs. The world capitalist crisis has been fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic and, has exploded to a new stage with the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.

The entry of the working class into struggle in Sri Lanka comes on top of continuing anti-government protests throughout the island that began in early April. This mass movement has not only shaken the Rajapakse government to the core but the entire ruling establishment, including the trade unions which act as vital props for the capitalist system.

For all their militant posturing about tomorrow's general strike, the unions are desperately seeking to apply a brake on the developing strike movement of the working class.

Ravi Kumudesh, the leader of the Health Professionals Federation, declared: "We gave the government until May 6 to resign and if the government does not listen to the people, we will have to have a hartal."

The general secretary of the Ceylon Teachers' Union, Joseph Stalin, thundered: "If the government is not willing to leave, we

will have to kick it out."

What is the political program, however, that the unions are pushing behind this empty bombast?

All of them are seeking to divert the working class into the dead-end of parliamentary politics and into the arms of the capitalist opposition parties.

In its statement on May 1, the National Trade Union Front and Mass Organisations listed its main demands as follows: "Resignation of the discredited President and Prime Minister and the government; Allow for an interim regime for a certain period; Political stability with a small cabinet; Exercising people's sovereignty through parliament; Establish a government after certain period of time with people's mandate."

The Trade Union Coordinating Committee, the other union front calling Friday's general strike, is campaigning on the same basis.

What is the meaning of these demands? It is to replace the totally discredited Rajapakse government with an unelected interim government of opposition parties, then hold elections. The purpose of the interim regime is crystal clear: to establish "political stability," in other words to suppress the mass strike and protest movement so as to stabilize capitalist rule.

The demands of the unions are virtually identical to those of the opposition parties—the right-wing Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Sinhala-communist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—as well as the corporate lobby groups. "Political stability" is what is being demanded by big business as well as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and foreign investors.

None of the parliamentary parties—government and opposition alike—has any alternative to the austerity program currently being implemented. None has opposed the government's decision to seek an IMF emergency bailout or explained that such a loan will inevitably mean more, not less, austerity. The SJB and JVP both have a track record of implementing pro-market restructuring.

What is being prepared is an even worse social disaster for working people. After two weeks of talks with the IMF, the finance ministry issued a statement on May 2 outlining what is being discussed as the price for a bailout.

It made clear that sweeping privatisation is on the agenda, as

“investment in sectors such as education, healthcare, public transport, and service delivery,” is required. The statement bluntly declared that “a culture of unproductive government subsidisation and handouts is no longer viable,” meaning price subsidies, welfare payments and social services are to be further reduced or completely axed.

Speaking to parliament on Tuesday, Finance Minister Ali Sabry said that the country’s foreign reserves have sunk as low as \$US50 million, adding: “I do not know whether these issues can be solved even in two years.” He made clear that large tax increases will be imposed, saying: “People who earn must share some money, or society will collapse. Tax revenue will have to increase by about 15 percent over the next two to three years.”

The IMF is demanding that workers and poor be compelled to pay for the already crumbling public healthcare, education of children and all other services, from their meagre wages. At the same time jobs, wages and pensions will be slashed. In short, workers and poor must sacrifice for the survival of decaying capitalism.

The entire political establishment, including the opposition parties and the trade unions, knows that such austerity measures, coming on top of an already dire social crisis, cannot be implemented democratically. Behind the scenes, the security forces are being prepared for use against the protests and strikes, whether by the Rajapakse regime or any capitalist government that replaces it. Already the police have opened fire without warning on protesters in Rambukkana, killing Chaminda Lakshan and wounding others.

The trade unions are playing a criminal political role. Their strikes are called not to resolve the social and economic crisis facing workers, but to let off steam and to buy time for the political establishment as it prepares its deep attacks on the working class. It is trying to hoodwink workers into believing that an “interim regime” and elections will end the social disaster they confront.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns the working class the only way to defend its democratic and social rights is to mobilise its independent strength on the basis of a program that meets its urgent class needs—in other words, a socialist program.

We encourage workers everywhere—in your factories and workplaces, in the plantations, and in working-class suburbs—to form action committees independent of the unions to fight for your class interests.

To defend democratic rights, the SEP demands the immediate abolition of the executive presidential system, along with all repressive legislation, including the emergency laws, the Essential Public Services Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

There is no solution for working people for the spiraling price increases, shortages of essentials and creeping starvation within the capitalist system.

The SEP proposes the following demands as the basis for a political struggle by the working class through its action committees:

- Take the production and distribution of all essential goods and other resources critical for public lives under the democratic control of the workers!
- Nationalise banks, large corporations, large estates and other major economic centres under workers’ control!
- Reject the austerity demands of the IMF and the World Bank, that represent the international banks and financial institutions!
 - Seize the enormous wealth of the billionaires and corporations!
 - Abolish all the debt of the poor peasants and small-business holders! Reinstating all the subsidies, including fertiliser subsidies for the peasantry!
 - Guarantee jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions! Index wages to the cost of living!
 - Repudiate all foreign loans!

By building action committees and fighting for its social rights, the working class will begin to rally to its side the rural masses who are suffering from the same attacks.

In opposition to the unions’ campaign for an interim regime and the defense of capitalism, the SEP advocates the revolutionary overthrow of the profit system and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government to refashion society on a socialist basis.

In this political struggle, Sri Lankan workers need to turn to their class brothers and sisters around the world who face similar attacks and are now entering into struggle. There is no national solution in any country to the crisis created by global capitalism confronting workers.

That is why the SEP urges workers to build a network of action committees and coordinate with workers in other countries through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The past month testifies the urgency of the tasks facing the working class and the need to base its political fight on the socialist and internationalist program elaborated by the SEP. Such a struggle requires revolutionary leadership. We urge workers wanting to form action committees to contact the SEP. Above all, we call on you to join the SEP and build it as a mass party.



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