Following yesterday's general strike, Sri Lankan president imposes state of emergency

Our reporters
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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse last night imposed a state of emergency, after a one-day general strike and business shutdown (hartal) calling for the president and his government to resign paralysed the island's economy yesterday.

Under the state of emergency, Rajapakse has sweeping powers to deploy the military as well as the police, to arrest people without a warrant, ban strikes and protests, enforce curfews and impose media censorship, among other things.

The president's proclamation of a statement of emergency declared that it was made "in the interests of public security, the protection of public order and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community."

The state of emergency is in addition to extensive powers that Rajapakse already wields as executive president and under a battery of repressive legislation.

The proclamation of a state of emergency is the second in just over a month. The first, on March 31, was used to impose a curfew in an attempt suppress emerging anti-government protests. However, protesters defied the curfew, the government backed down and the president revoked his emergency regulations on April 5.

Over the past month, protests have continued and mounted on a daily basis, driven by the intolerable economic and social crisis facing working people. Prices of essential items have skyrocketed and goods are in short supply, forcing people to queue for hours for food, fuel and medicines. Electricity outages last for long hours each day.

President Rajapakse has clearly been shaken by the entry of the working class into the struggle against the government. Yesterday's general strike, involving millions, followed a previous one-day general strike on April 28.

Desperate to retain control of the mounting anti-government movement of working class, the trade unions have called for an indefinite general strike from May 11 if the president and the government have not resigned.

The power of the working class was evident everywhere yesterday. Almost every section of workers took part in yesterday's general strike. Railway and private bus transport was completely crippled. Electricity and postal workers and all government administrative employees took part in the strike. State and private banks were shut down.

Health workers, including doctors, nurses, paramedics and other employees, joined the strike while keeping skeleton services for emergency cases and to treat critically ill patients. Public schools were forced to close, as all teachers and principals participated in the action.

Tea and rubber plantation workers struck and thousands came to nearby cities to hold demonstrations.

Workers in many free trade zones stopped work. According to the *Daily FT*, tens of thousands of workers were involved. No factories operated in the key free trade zones of Katunayake, Biyagama and Seethawaka, and all vehicles were blocked from entering or leaving.

Koggala free trade zone workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the companies closed the gates to the zone, preventing them from leaving. Thousands of garment workers in Hatton in the island's plantation district stopped work and demonstrated in the city.

Port workers wanted to join the strike but the port unions limited them to a "work-to-rule campaign" and a midday demonstration. WSWS reporters were told that port employees argued with union officials to be allowed to join the strike action.

Hundreds of thousands of people participated in protests in many cities and towns across the country, blocking roads and chanting anti-government slogans. The number of workers actively involved was far higher than in the April 28 general strike, when the unions did not encourage public protests.

Thousands of students marched from Jayawardenepura University in Colombo and blocked the main roads leading to the national parliament complex beginning on Thursday. Yesterday, when they tried to march on parliament, which was in session, the police blocked the road and attacked the protesters with tear gas and water cannon.

The determination of workers to wage a struggle to defend their interests is in marked contrast to the perspective of the trade unions, which is to direct this mass movement back into the dead-end of parliamentary politics.

The National Trade Union Front and Mass Organisations and Trade Union Coordinating Committee is calling for an interim government to replace the president and his government and for

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new elections.

These demands are almost identical to those of the capitalist opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—and the corporate lobby groups. The Frontline Socialist Party, which has lined up with the trade unions, and its Inter-University Student Front have a similar program.

These opposition parties have no alternative other than unloading the burden of the economic crisis on the back of the people. Any interim government formed by the opposition parties would implement the demands of the International Monetary Fund for draconian new austerity measures as the price for an emergency loan.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members intervened in many parts of the country, including Colombo, Jaffna, Galle, Maskeliya in the central plantation district and the Katunayake Free Trade Zone. They explained that capitalism was the source of the present economic crisis and outlined the party's socialist program to address the needs of the masses.

Many workers expressed their utter hostility not just to the government, but to the entire political establishment.

Shanaka, a private bank employee in Colombo, said: "I am participating in this struggle because I strongly believe that there must be a change in the entire political system to end the utterly miserable conditions faced by the Sri Lankan masses. All the rulers who have governed Sri Lanka so far have been deceiving the people. It is clear that they are all defending the same policy."

A retail shop assistant in Galle said: "I cannot maintain my patience anymore. My meagre salary is not enough to live on. I cannot even spend money to educate my children. I cannot find enough money for basic necessities. My wife doesn't have a job. I have nothing to sell at my house. We are so helpless. I do not believe in any of these capitalist politicians."

Amila, a factory worker from the Puttalam district, explained: "We started to join the protest at 4.30 to 5.00 in the morning independently with workers representing almost all the factories. The unions did not call us out. This government must be sent home. All the 225 politicians [in parliament] must go. Their plundered wealth must be taken back. People have no fuel, no fertiliser, nothing to eat. Whatever government comes next, they will do the same thing."

Yesterday's proclamation of a state of emergency confirms the SEP's warnings to the working class in its party statement. While the president backed off his previous attempt to use the security forces against the protests, he knows full well that the draconian demands of the IMF cannot be imposed democratically or peacefully.

In its April 7 statement, the SEP warned: "Rajapakse is biding his time. He can reimpose emergency rule without warning and again mobilise the military. He can ban industrial action, proscribe organisations and political parties, censor the media and arbitrarily arrest and detain individuals. The presidency itself must be abolished. Along with Gotabhaya, the executive presidency and the barrage of anti-democratic laws in the hands of the government have got to go."

The declaration of a state of emergency adds to the urgency of the working class taking its own independent action, political and industrial, to prepare to counter the threat of a bloody crackdown on the protest movement. The government has already demonstrated that it will use violence with the police shooting of demonstrators in Rambukkana, which killed Chaminda Lakshan and seriously injured others.

Matters cannot be left in the hands of the trade unions, which have demonstrated time and again their willingness to sell out strikes and struggles to serve the needs of big business and the government at the expense of workers. The SEP urges workers to form their own action committees, independent of the unions, and to link up with other sections of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally to fight for their demands and defend themselves from the government assaults on their rights.

In its statement, the SEP elaborated a socialist program to counter the attacks on the democratic and social rights of the working class. These included taking the production and distribution of all essential goods under the democratic control of the working class through the nationalisation of the banks, large corporations, large estates and other major economic centres under workers' control. It called for the repudiation of all foreign loans.

By establishing action committees and fighting for its class interests, the working class can rally the rural toilers and urban poor to its side in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to refashion society along socialist lines and meet the pressing needs of the majority, not boost the profits of the wealthy few.

The SEP alone fights for this perspective. We urge you to join the SEP and build it as the mass party needed to provide political leadership to the struggles that are rapidly unfolding.

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