

Oppose the draconian State of Emergency! No to presidential dictatorship! Abolish the executive presidency!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns President Gotabaya Rajapakse's proclamation last Friday of a state of emergency and demands its immediate end.

The declaration of a state of emergency is in preparation to crush the working class and the month-long struggle of working people for the president's resignation and an end to the social misery created by skyrocketing inflation and chronic shortages of essentials.

In one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6, the working class demonstrated its immense social power in the struggle for these demands. Last Friday, the self-employed, rural poor, fishermen and small business people also joined in the combined general strike and hartal, shutting down the whole island's economy.

The strike and hartal terrified the ruling class and entire political establishment—government and opposition alike—including the trade unions that called the strike.

Rajapakse's response to last Friday's strike was to immediately impose a state of emergency as the means of enhancing his already extensive authoritarian executive powers. Under the emergency law, he can deploy the military and police to arrest people without a warrant, ban strikes, protests and meetings, impose curfews and media censorship, and proscribe political parties.

The president has already taken the first step in deploying the military by canceling all leave for members of the security forces. The military, built up during the 26-year anti-Tamil communal war, is the largest per capita in South Asia and is heavily politicised. Over the past two years, Rajapakse has integrated top military officers into key positions in the civilian administration.

Rajapakse's claim that he has invoked emergency powers to maintain "supplies and services essential to the life of the community" is a naked lie. His regime and the capitalist class have already completely disrupted "the supplies and services essential to the life of the community," creating intolerable conditions for workers and the poor.

While the Rajapakse regime is mobilising the military, the trade unions are demobilising the working class. Clearly shaken by what they said was the "unexpected success" of last Friday's strike and hartal and fearing a confrontation with the government, the unions have called off the indefinite general strike that was due to start next Wednesday and substituted token protests instead—daily lunch-

hour workers' rallies.

If the president and the government do not resign, they declare that they will organise a march to the national parliament on May 17 and demand a solution. Their solution, as they have already spelled out, is that the capitalist opposition parties—principally the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—form an interim government, with early elections subsequently to be held.

This is a solution for the ruling class not the working class. All of the parliamentary parties—government and opposition—are committed to imposing the draconian dictates of the International Monetary Fund in return for an emergency bailout. As Finance Minister Ali Sabry declared: "It is going to get worse before it gets better... It is going to be a painful few years ahead."

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the trade unions' treacherous decision to call off this week's general strike. This only gives President Rajapakse time to mobilise the military while conniving behind closed doors with the opposition parties. He has offered the post of prime minister to SJB leader Sajith Premadasa, who has declined but declared that his party would back an interim regime from outside.

Left in the hands of the trade unions, the working class will be betrayed. These are the same unions that have sold out every struggle by workers—including health workers and teachers—over the past two years. Leaders of the Federation of Health Professionals, Ravi Kumudesh and Saman Ratnapriya, openly declare that they called strikes and protests of their members not to fight for workers' rights, but to "manage their anger."

The urgent task facing the working class is to mobilise its strength independently to defeat Rajapakse's threat of military repression and to fight for a political program in its class interests.

The SEP urges workers to immediately form their own democratically-elected action committees, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist parties to which they are tied, in every factory and workplace, in the plantations and in working-class suburbs and towns.

The SEP is ready to assist in building action committees, as we already have done among plantation and health care workers. We urge workers and youth to contact us.

We agree that President Rajapakse and his government have got to go, but that is not enough.

* The SEP demands the abolition of executive presidency, which is now being used to prepare a military-backed presidential dictatorship.

*The SEP demands the repeal of all repressive laws. These include the Public Security Act that has empowered the President to invoke the State of Emergency; the Essential Public Services Act that is used to criminalise industrial action; and the Prevention of Terrorism Act that enables arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention without trial must also go.

Amid the deep crisis of capitalism in Sri Lanka and internationally, the ruling class is determined to defend its profits and wealth by imposing huge new burdens on working people. The working class needs a political program based on socialist and internationalist principles to fight for its social needs.

The SEP proposes the following demands as the basis for the political and industrial struggle of the action committees:

* For workers' democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential goods and resources critical for the lives of people! Nationalise the banks, big corporations, plantations and other major economic nerve centres!

The capitalist class exploits its ownership of the means of production and distribution to amass enormous profits. The only way for the working class to provide for its essential needs is to take them out of the hands of the capitalists and to make an inventory of the resources so that they can be used to end the current suffering and misery.

* Repudiate all foreign debts! No to the austerity demands of the IMF and World Bank that represent the international bankers and financial institutions!

The Rajapakse government justifies its harsh austerity measures so as to repay billions of dollars to the global bankers. The working class did not accumulate these debts and should not be forced to pay. The money for the repayments should instead be used to make food, fuel, medicines and other essentials available to working people at affordable prices.

* Seize the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations!

According to World Inequality Database, in 2021 the richest 10 percent of Sri Lankan society held a massive 63.8 percent of the island's total wealth while the bottom 50 percent had just 4.3 percent. This vast wealth which was created by the working class must be seized and distributed on the basis of social need.

* Cancel all debts of poor and marginal farmers, fishermen and small business holders! Reinstate all subsidies, including fertiliser subsidies for farmers!

By providing a way out of their crushing economic problems, the working class will become a pole of attraction for the oppressed rural masses and the operators of small businesses who are burdened by high debt, costly inputs and prices that do not meet their essential needs.

* Guarantee jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions!

If the IMF has its way, there will be an avalanche of job destruction. Left in the hands of the trade unions, jobs, wages and conditions will be further bargained away as has been the case for years.

* Index wages to the cost of living!

The rapid increase of the inflation—nearly 30 percent in April on year-on-year basis—has already eaten away wages. Food inflation hit 46.6 percent in April and many workers are unable to adequately feed their families. Increase wages immediately to make up for past losses and index wages on a monthly basis to the cost of living.

*** Allocate tens of billions to social programs, including free education and free healthcare, guaranteeing high quality services to all those who need them!**

Successive governments have starved public education and health care of funds while pumping money into the expansion of the military and police forces that are now being prepared to repress the mass protest movement.

The treachery of the trade unions poses the necessity of action committees linking up to organise a united struggle to defend the working class from state repression, to oust the Rajapakse government and to ensure that rights of working people take priority over the profits of the super-rich.

Workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—all joined the general strike last Friday on the basis of their common class interests. Any attempt to divide the working class through the whipping up of communal hostility and hatred must be opposed.

This political struggle inevitably raises the question of which class will rule. We warn that a capitalist government—whether the Rajapakse regime or an interim government—will stop at nothing to impose the demands of international finance capital and will not hesitate to resort to military repression to crack down any opposition.

The establishment of independent action committees across the island and the development of a unified political struggle will win the support of the rural masses and establish the basis for a workers' and peasants' government to refashion society along socialist policies.

There is no national solution to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka. It is part of the rapidly deepening crisis of global capitalism crisis intensified by COVID-19 pandemic and now the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Workers around the world are facing similar attacks. The working class in Sri Lanka needs to turn to its class brothers and sisters in India and throughout South Asia and the world for a joint struggle against capitalism.

By building action committees, Sri Lankan workers can coordinate their struggle with those of workers around the world by joining the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Above all what is necessary is the building of a revolutionary leadership, in Sri Lanka and internationally. We urge workers and youth to join the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, and to build it as the mass party needed to lead the struggles ahead.



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