

Sri Lanka: Build independent action committees to protect lives and democratic rights!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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The Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, issued the following statement in Sinhalese and Tamil on May 10. The day before, mass anger had erupted across the island after the Rajapakse government unleashed goon violence against protesters in downtown Colombo. The attack backfired. Spontaneous walkouts by postal, health and other workers compelled the trade unions to call an indefinite general strike, and the prime minister, President Gotabaya Rajapakse's brother, Mahindra Rajapakse, resigned.

As the statement elaborates, the SEP is fighting for the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the ongoing preparations of President Rajapakse and the military to violently suppress the mass anti-government protests, and the parallel attempts to hoodwink the masses through the establishment of an "interim" government, including the opposition parties, but no less committed to imposing International Monetary Fund austerity.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) strongly condemns the brutal attack on Monday by thugs of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) on unarmed anti-government protesters encamped at the Galle Face Green. The SEP calls on the working class to intervene independently to protect the lives and democratic rights of the working people.

Facing unbearable conditions due to draconian attacks on social and democratic rights by the government, scarcity of basic essential items and skyrocketing prices, and hours-long daily power outages, masses of workers, youth and the rural poor have entered into an indefinite protest demanding that President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government resign.

Monday's goon attack has clearly revealed the extremely dangerous situation facing the masses in this struggle. Under these circumstances, the working class must intervene independently to ensure the safety and the supply of essential items, including food and services required to people's lives.

The SEP calls on workers and the rural and urban toilers to build their own action committees, independent of the trade unions, in every factory, workplace, estate and working-class neighborhood. The SEP has already formed such action committees among health employees, estate workers, teachers, artists and migrant workers. It will assist workers and the oppressed masses who take steps to

expand the action committees and organise them all over the country.

In connection with this network of action committees to ensure essential services and defend democratic rights, the SEP insists that defence committees and defence guards should be built to defend the masses from the attacks of government goons.

By allowing the thugs to freely carry out their attacks on the Galle Face protest site, the police once again have shown that there is no security for the working class, youth and the rural poor from the security forces and police which are part of the capitalist state. The real function of the police was demonstrated in the killing of Chaminda Lakshan and injuring of several dozen others when police fired on unarmed protestors in Rambukkana.

To ensure its basic necessities and its defence, the working class can place no faith in the trade unions to wage a fight against the government and its attacks. From the outset of the protest movement, trade unions have blocked the independent intervention of the working class. They were compelled to call two general strikes—on April 28 and May 6—due to the enormous pressure exerted by workers.

After the May 6 general strike, however, the trade unions cancelled an indefinite general strike and a hartal—general shut down of small businesses—due to start on May 11, and emboldened the government to prepare the thug attacks against the protest movement. Now the unions have called upon an indefinite general strike from the Monday evening because the workers in several sectors, including the National Hospital and the Postal Department, have launched strikes and protests outside of the unions.

The unbearable social conditions facing the workers, youth and the poor will not go away under any capitalist government. Like the government, all the capitalist parties, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), have agreed to implement the vicious anti-working class austerity program demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In such a situation, it is inevitable that working people will be compelled to enter into a struggle against the capitalist system in order to defend their social and democratic rights. Such a struggle will only be successful if its political and practical preparation takes place under the leadership of the working class. This

underscores the urgency of building workers' action committees.

Action committees are an organisational form in which workers and the poor establish their unity against the capitalist system, democratically across any communal or linguistic divides. It sets as its target the formation of a workers' and peasants' government as the alternative to bourgeois rule. Without a progressive political perspective outbursts of anger, such as led to the destruction of property on Monday night, only strengthen the hands of the government and reaction.

While capitalism has revealed its complete incapability to meet the needs of the masses, a network of action committees built under the leadership of the working class can organise to provide the essential necessities for all. Rural action committees can deliver fertiliser essential for poor peasants, direct the harvest to markets, provide storage facilities and decide prices.

The SEP statement issued on April 7 outlined the following policies:

We propose the following program and policies to animate the work of the action committees to address the pressing needs of the masses:

· For workers' democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential items and other 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 blames its harsh austerity measures on the need to repay billions of dollars to the global bankers. The opposition parties agree. Instead of the \$US7 billion due this year flowing into the coffers of the international banks, it should be used to pay for the food, fuel, medicines and other essential goods needed by working people.

· 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 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! Index wages to the cost of living!

If the IMF and international bankers have their way, there will be an avalanche of job destruction. Inflation has already run rampant and eaten away wages. Left in the hands of the trade unions, jobs, wages and conditions will be further bargained away as has been the case for years.

Workers fighting in Sri Lanka share a common trench with their class brothers and sisters and common class enemies. The rising tide of class struggle around the world gives Sri Lankan workers potential allies and bases of support in factories, workplaces and offices everywhere.

This can be developed into an internationally-coordinated struggle against the economic domination of global corporations, banks and finance houses to put an end to capitalism. Action committees built in Sri Lanka need to unite with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), that has been launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The Socialist Equality Party must also issue a warning. The Rajapakse regime, like its predecessors going back to formal independence in 1948, and its racist allies will resort to communal provocations and the poison of Sinhala chauvinism in a desperate effort to divide Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers along ethnic lines. However, all workers and the poor are facing the same desperate economic crisis. The rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism is essential in building the unity of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally.

A socialist revolution is needed in Sri Lanka and for that a revolutionary leadership is essential. The entire history of the past century has demonstrated that without a revolutionary party even the most militant and determined struggles of the working class are inevitably defeated, opening the door to counter-revolution and savage repression.

We urge workers and youth who agree with this program to join the Socialist Equality Party and build it into the mass party of the working class.



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