

Sri Lankan President Rajapakse installs Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister to enforce austerity dictates of the US and IMF

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka condemns President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's appointment of the pro-US United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister on Thursday evening.

This is yet another act by Rajapakse directed against workers, youth and the poor who are demanding the ouster of the president and his government and an end to the social disaster inflicted on them.

Working people are facing acute shortages and increased prices for all basic items, such as food, medicine and fuel, and they are suffering lengthy power cuts. This crisis is being driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.

Rajapakse's new government under Wickremesinghe will not address any of these conditions. Rather, it will only worsen them. It has been set up to implement the brutal austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The president and his new government must go! The way forward for the working class is through building action committees, mobilising its industrial and political strength, and fighting for socialist policies.

Rajapakse made his sinister move just a day after deploying the military with the orders to "shoot on sight" to enforce the law. Last Friday, after a massive one-day general strike and hartal (shut down of small businesses), Rajapakse proclaimed a repressive State of Emergency.

On Monday, Rajapakse's ruling party goons, organised by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, were unleashed to attack unarmed anti-government protesters.

Politically weakened, President Rajapakse has been engaged in behind-the-scenes maneuvering involving Wickremesinghe as a go between President Rajapakse and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse on the one hand, and the US and the IMF, on the other.

Wickremesinghe is the sole United National Party MP elected to the 225-member parliament in the August 2020

general elections. Without a majority, he does not have any legitimacy and standing, even according to Sri Lanka's constitutional norms. The new prime minister will be able to secure a majority in the parliament only through the underhanded deals and horse-trading long practiced by the Sri Lanka political elite.

For Rajapakse, the only qualification for installing Wickremesinghe is his notorious record—as an MP and six-time prime minister—and as an agent of US imperialism and the IMF's austerity measures. Rajapakse now turns to this corrupt political hack to implement a brutal IMF program and suppress the growing anger of workers and the poor.

Just minutes after Wickremesinghe was sworn in as prime minister, the US Ambassador Julie Chung in Colombo greeted him with praise. "His appointment as PM and the quick formation of an inclusive government, are first steps to addressing the crisis and promoting stability. We encourage meaningful progress at IMF and long-term solutions that meet the needs of all Sri Lankans."

This statement makes clear that the appointment of Wickremesinghe is to take forward American imperialism's strategic interests in the region, and, in particular, the alignment of Sri Lanka in the US war drive against China.

Wickremesinghe's record, since his election to parliament in 1977 under former President J.R. Jayawardene's UNP government, is notorious. That government implemented ruthless open market economic policies and crushed the 1980 general strike of public sector workers, sacking 100,000 employees who resisted the wiping out of their social rights. It also unleashed a 26-year-long communal war against Tamils to divide, weaken and suppress the working class. Wickremesinghe is particularly praised for having introduced free trade zones as cheap-labor platforms for ruthless exploitation by international capital.

Wickremesinghe, together with former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, played the main role in the 2015 Washington-sponsored regime-change operation to oust then

President Mahinda Rajapakse and replace him with the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena. The US wanted to break Rajapakse's relations with Beijing and line up Sri Lanka with its "pivot to Asia" targeting China.

After he was sworn in as prime minister yesterday, Wickremesinghe declared: "We are facing a crisis, we have to get out of it."

But by what means? According to Wickremesinghe, it can be done only by implementing the IMF's dictates. That is, by implementing savage austerity measures, including restructuring state-owned enterprises, increasing taxes and slashing the fiscal deficit through deep cuts to public sector jobs, wages, pensions and the remaining price subsidies.

The social calamity for working people that will result from these measures will dwarf what is already occurring. It is the drive to impose the demands of foreign creditors and the Sri Lankan corporate and financial elite at the expense of the vast majority of the population.

Wickremesinghe's appointment will be met with enormous opposition from the working class and rural poor because his record is well-known and the consequences of his policies catastrophic.

The opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) declared yesterday that it will not support Wickremesinghe and blamed Rajapakse for not inviting it to form a government, having expressed its readiness to establish an interim regime. Yesterday afternoon the SJB revised its earlier demand for the president's immediate resignation, asking instead for a time frame for this to occur.

All the leaders of the SJB were members of the UNP before they split from it in early 2020 and formed the new party. The SJB has no alternative solution to the economic crisis other than imposing the IMF's demands.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake said that his party had presented a program to the president and expressed willingness to form an interim regime. Dissanayake lamented that Rajapakse was not interested in holding discussions with the JVP, which, in fact, has no program, other than the ruthless implementation of austerity.

Addressing a Buddhist monks' organisation last week, Dissanayake said that when the Greek economy collapsed, it was only revived by "strict decisions." Similarly, Sri Lanka, he said could only resolve the crisis by "changing the lifestyle" for two to three years, that is, by further slashing living conditions.

The working class cannot expect the trade unions to defend their social and democratic rights. For the last two months, the unions have sought to divert workers struggles, confining them to calls for the government to resign and the formation of a new capitalist interim government, the same

demands made by the opposition parties. This has only strengthened the hands of the government and tied workers to capitalist politics.

The SEP calls on the working class to reject both the Wickremesinghe regime and any other interim capitalist regime.

We call on the working class to take matters into its own hands. This can be done by forming action committees in every workplace, working-class suburb, and plantation, independent of and in opposition to all unions and parties of the bourgeois political establishment. A network of such committees throughout the island is necessary to coordinate and unify the entire working class.

The SEP calls on these committees to take up the following demands:

- Workers democratic control of production and distribution of all essential items and other critical resources for the lives of the people. So long as the means of production and distribution remain in the hands of capitalist class, they use them only to amass profits.

- The banks, big corporations and large estates must be nationalised and placed under workers' control. All foreign debts must be repudiated and those funds used instead for the social welfare of workers and the poor.

- In the face of rampant inflation, wages must be indexed to the cost of living. Farmers and other self-employed must be provided with subsidies and have all their debts cancelled.

The establishment of a network of action committees will unify the entire working class in Sri Lanka, across all languages and religions, and in a common struggle. The SEP has already built action committees among plantation and health workers, teachers and artists and is ready to assist in forming them at other workplaces.

In its May 10 statement, the SEP also called on workers to form defence committees and defence guards, along with action committees, to defend the working class and rural masses from the attacks of pro-government thugs.

By advancing these policies, workers can rally the rural and urban poor to their side and fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for international socialism.

We urge workers and youth to join this struggle and build the SEP as the mass party to lead the fight for socialism.



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