Sri Lankan prime minister demands more sacrifice from working people

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In a special address to the nation, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe bluntly outlined the dire economic situation confronting the country. He warned that "the next couple of months will be the most difficult ones in the lives of all citizens," and insisted that the population "must prepare to make some sacrifices."

Wickremesinghe made the statement late yesterday on the eve of today's parliamentary session, where a vote of support for the new prime minister is due to take place. He was only appointed by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse last Thursday amid an unprecedented economic, social and political crisis engulfing the country.

The president's brother, Mahinda Rajapakse, resigned as prime minister on May 9, after weeks of mass protests and strikes demanding the resignation of both Rajapakses and an end to the social disaster facing working people. Prices for essentials, including food, fuel and medicines, have skyrocketed. Chronic shortages have produced long queues, and lengthy power outages occur every day.

The turmoil in Sri Lanka is a particularly acute expression of the global crisis of capitalism that has been produced by the criminal "let it rip" pandemic policy of governments around the world, now compounded by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Sri Lanka's tourist industry has collapsed, remittances from Sri Lankans working overseas have slumped by 61 percent year-on-year and tea exports to the major markets of Ukraine and Russia have dried up. The country's central bank has declared a temporary default on the huge foreign loans of more than more than $51 billion. The lack of foreign exchange has meant that imports of fuel, medicines and basic food items cannot be paid for.

Wickremesinghe's appointment was a desperate bid to buy time for the ruling class as negotiations are underway with the IMF and creditors. His speech yesterday was aimed at convincing them that his government will take the harsh austerity measures they require, and bludgeoning working people into "sacrificing" for the nation.

Wickremesinghe offered no relief for workers or the poor, millions of whom are struggling to put food on the table, obtain medicines or pay for transport to go to work. Instead, he emphasised the depth of the economic crisis to justify the harsh measures that he intends to take.

In November 2019, he said, Sri Lanka's foreign exchange reserves were $US7.5 billion, but "today, it is a challenge for the treasury to find $1 million… To ease the queues, we must obtain approximately $75 million within the next couple of days.

"At the moment, we only have petrol stocks for a single day," he threatened. While a diesel shipment arrived on Sunday, more will be needed in the coming days. "A quarter of electricity is generated through oil. Therefore, there is a possibility that the daily power outages will increase to 15 hours a day," he continued.

"Another grave concern is the lack of medicine," Wickermesinghe said. "There is a severe shortage of a number of medicines including medicine required for heart disease as well as surgical equipment. Payments have not been made for four months to suppliers of medicine, medical equipment, and food for patients."

In a revealing comment, Wickremesinghe declared his intention to sell off the Sri Lankan Airlines and then noted that even with the sale there would be huge losses to be paid. "You must be aware that this is a loss that must be borne even by the poor people of this country who have never stepped on an airplane," he said.

The remark is an open confirmation that the working people are going to be compelled to bear the brunt of the capitalist crisis—to pay off the huge loans incurred for the benefit of the wealthy corporate elite. The prime minister also foreshadowed further large price hikes for fuel and electricity, saying that government subsidies were no longer affordable.

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Wickremesinghe concluded his address by declaring that "these facts are unpleasant and terrifying" but promising that the "tough times" would be short, and that a rosy future was ahead if everyone pulled together. He painted himself as a martyr to the nation, ready to tread a dangerous and difficult path.

What a fraud! Wickremesinghe has been installed to do the bidding of Sri Lankan big business and the IMF and foreign creditors. As prime minister on five previous occasions, he is notorious for his imposition of pro-market restructuring and for his pro-US orientation. His appointment was welcomed by the US ambassador to Colombo.

Wickremesinghe has spent his first few days in office huddled in discussions with diplomats from the US, Japan and China, while holding closed door talks with government and opposition figures in a desperate effort to pull together a majority for the parliamentary vote today.

His lack of any popular support is underscored by the fact that he is the only representative of his United National Party (UNP) in 225-seat parliament. The UNP split in 2020, with the majority of its members forming what is now the main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya. The SJB has indicated qualified support for a Wickremesinghe government but has refused to enter its cabinet. As of yesterday, only four ministers had been appointed to the Wickremesinghe cabinet—all members of President Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP).

Even if Wickremesinghe gains a parliamentary majority today, his government will inevitably lurch from crisis to crisis as it seeks to impose intolerable new burdens on working people. Anti-government protests are continuing at Galle Face Green in central Colombo. Protest leaders have opposed Wickremesinghe's appointment, reflecting far broader distrust in the manoeuvres being carried out in the political establishment.

Rejecting the main demand of the protests, President Rajapakse has flatly refused to resign and retains sweeping powers, including to dismiss the government and impose police-state measures. In the wake of a general strike of millions of workers throughout the island on May 5, he imposed a nationwide state of emergency, connived with his brother to orchestrate a violent attack on protesters at Galle Face Green, then exploited the eruption of anger to institute a curfew and mobilise the military onto the streets.

In comments to the WSWS, Wije Dias, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, condemned Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's call for working people to make an unending series of sacrifices in the name of the country.

"The Socialist Equality Party strongly urges the working class, rural poor and youth of all communities, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim, to reject Wickremesinghe's appeal, which he makes on behalf of the international bankers and the local capitalist leaches who have bled white the Sri Lankan people, under different bourgeois governments for the last 74 years, since the bogus independence.

"It is a totally different outcome from what protesting workers, small farmers and youth expected when they occupied the streets with their mass protests and one-day general strikes. They wanted an end to the shortages and high prices of fuel, gas, milk powder and the outages of electricity which have become intolerable under the capitalist profit system.

"It is the trade unions and their pseudo-left allies, all of which have a long history of treachery, that are consciously blocking the victory of the mass struggle by spreading false illusions in bourgeois parliamentary democracy and thus continue to sustain capitalist rule.

"By contrast, the SEP, from the outset, has called on the working class to take matters into its own hands by forming action committees, independent of the trade unions, and proposed concrete demands around which workers can fight for their interests and win the oppressed masses its side. This would lay the basis for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies to meet the needs of the masses.

"This is the only solution that will make the aspirations of the working people a reality."

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