

Sri Lankan workers and rural poor must mobilize against the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe austerity agenda!

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Ranil Wickremesinghe, the newly installed prime minister of Sri Lanka, delivered a national address on Monday outlining his government's plans for a ruthless assault on the democratic and social rights of workers and rural toilers.

The Sri Lanka ruling class is seeking to place the full burden of the economic crisis, enormously intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia, onto the backs of workers. The harsh austerity measures that are planned will make worse the already unbearable conditions produced by skyrocketing prices, daily power outages and shortages of fuel, food, milk powder, cooking gas and other basic goods.

The massive popular protests demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government forced the resignation of his brother, Mahinda Rajapakse, as prime minister on May 9. President Rajapakse's decision to appoint Wickremesinghe in his place is a desperate effort to stabilize bourgeois rule.

The widely hated Wickremesinghe is the sole parliamentarian representing his right-wing United National Party (UNP). His primary qualification for the position is his notorious record of aggressively implementing International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures and serving the reactionary geopolitical interests of the US and its allies.

The installation of Wickremesinghe marks a turning point in the Sri Lankan ruling class's assault on the working class and rural toilers through the implementation of IMF-dictated austerity measures. Having failed to suppress the ongoing popular protests, Rajapakse has brought in Wickremesinghe, calculating that he is the most experienced bourgeois politician for that job.

Wickremesinghe described the unprecedented economic crisis confronting Sri Lanka as "extremely precarious." He cited the rise of the budget deficit to 13 percent of GDP, dwindling foreign currency reserves and a severe shortage of fuel and essential medicines. He also threatened to

implement 15-hour daily power cuts.

Wickremesinghe is seeking to utilize the dire economic crisis to justify placing the full burden of the crisis on workers and rural poor. His speech clearly indicated what workers can expect, on top of the measures already implemented by Rajapakse.

Wickremesinghe said that the government intends "to present a concessionary budget." By "concessions" is meant the further destruction of jobs and working and living conditions.

Citing the huge losses faced by Sri Lankan Airlines, Wickremesinghe proposed to privatize the national carrier, which would inevitably be followed by an assault on the jobs and working conditions of airline workers. This would also pave the way for the further privatization or commercialization of several other public sector firms—including the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) and the Water Supply and Drainage Board—as dictated by the IMF's conditions for any emergency loan.

Wickremesinghe's complaint about the losses at the CPC and CEB is a warning that fuel and electricity prices will be further increased. Increases in water tariffs would likely follow. Increased fuel prices will lead to further increases in the cost of public transportation, which most workers use for daily commutes. It would also add to the prices of all essentials, including food.

Admitting the worsening situation facing working people, Wickremesinghe warned: "We must prepare ourselves to make some sacrifices. For a short period of time, our future will be even more difficult than the tough times through which we have passed."

Wickremesinghe talks about "ourselves," but the policies of the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government will impose "sacrifices" only on the working class, while shielding the super-rich and global investors and securing their profit interests.

Wickremesinghe tried to appease working people, claiming that “this [difficult] period will not be long,” as “in the coming months, our foreign allies will assist us.” This is a lie. Working people and rural toilers will have to continuously suffer on behalf of the super-rich and international finance capital.

The so-called assistance from “foreign allies”—that is, the imperialist powers, global banks, and other creditors controlled by them, including the IMF—will come with harsh conditions, including further cuts to subsidies, increased taxes and the “restructuring” of the public sector, that is, privatization or commercialization, along with cuts in jobs, wages and other benefits. Moreover, the US, Japan and India will use their assistance to press Colombo to integrate it more fully into their incendiary military-strategic offensive against China.

The immense crisis confronting bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka is part of the global crisis of capitalism, which cannot be resolved through such so-called “assistance” from governments and banks that are themselves mired in crisis.

There are already hints of the measures being prepared. Addressing the parliament Thursday, Wickremesinghe requested that non-essential public sector employees not report for duty the following day, citing the prevailing fuel shortage. This could lead to the slashing of jobs and wages in the public sector under the pretext of removing “non-essential” employees.

The working class and oppressed masses will not passively accept the class war that the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government is unleashing upon them. They have already been engaged in a month-long uprising against the government over the measures already delivered.

This popular movement reached a turning point with the powerful intervention of the working class, including in two one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6 and another general strike beginning May 9, which was only ended two days later in a treacherous betrayal by the unions. Millions of public, private and semi-government workers, uniting across all communal divisions—Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian—joined in these struggles.

Further austerity measures will intensify the social anger and opposition of workers and the rural poor, while escalating the immense political crisis of the Rajapakse government and bourgeois rule.

In response, the Rajapakse government is preparing for a military-police crackdown and accelerating its moves toward dictatorial forms of rule. Rajapakse imposed island-wide emergency rule on May 5, on the eve of a general strike. Later, on May 9, he conspired with his brother, then-Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, to unleash a brutal goon attack on anti-government protesters and exploited the situation to

impose curfews and deploy the military throughout the island.

The working class must prepare for a head-on collision with the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government and the entire capitalist order.

The unions have clearly shown their treacherous role as an industrial police force working on behalf of the government and employers. Having suppressed any intervention of the working class in anti-government protests for weeks, the unions were forced by the immense pressure from below to call the one-day April 28 and May 6 general strikes. However, they called these limited actions only so as to better contain the movement of the working class and tie it to the opposition parties, who themselves are all ready to impose brutal IMF austerity measures.

The decision by the unions to call off an indefinite strike scheduled for May 11 emboldened the Rajapakse government to carry out the May 9 goon attack on protesters. The unions were forced to call another general strike on the same day, as workers in several sectors, including the Postal Department and the Colombo National Hospital, went on strike on their own. But the unions then called off the action after two days.

Workers need to form their own action committees in all factories, workplaces, plantations and neighborhoods, independent of the unions, to organize and advance their struggle against harsh austerity measures and government repression. Defense committees and guards must be established in the face of government-organized goon squads.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) will assist workers in forming such committees. The SEP has advocated a series of political and social demands on which the struggles of those committees should be developed.

The SEP is spearheading the fight to develop the struggle of the working class, organized through action committees, towards the establishment of a government of workers and peasants, committed to socialist policies. This is part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally, which can only be carried out by uniting Sri Lankan workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout the world.

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