

Third National Congress of the SEP (Sri Lanka): Popular uprising against the Rajapakse government and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

7 June 2022

The following emergency resolution was unanimously adopted by the Third National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, held online from May 14-16, 2022. It is the first of two resolutions passed at the congress. The second resolution and international greetings to the event will be published later this week.

1. The current extraordinary political situation in Sri Lanka can properly be understood only by placing it in the context of the immense crisis of global capitalism, highly intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing US-NATO proxy war against Russia. A correct political orientation of the party towards the growing popular movement of workers, youth and rural toilers in Sri Lanka can only be developed through such an international approach.

2. The pandemic has brought to the surface the fundamental contradictions of world capitalism—between the outmoded nation-state system and the highly globalised world economy and between private ownership of the means of production and socialised production—giving them an intense explosive character. The US-NATO proxy war against Russia, using Ukraine as a bait, could lead to a direct conflict between the world's major nuclear powers, posing the danger of World War III and threatening the lives of billions around the world. The Ukraine war crisis and harsh sanctions implemented by the US and its allies in Europe against Russia, as a part of their proxy war, have led to shortages and higher prices of food, fuel and other essentials globally, intensifying the class struggle internationally. This is the context in which the extraordinary political situation in Sri Lanka has developed.

3. The mass protests against the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse over the unbearable conditions confronting the working people, youth and rural toilers—mainly shortages and skyrocketing prices of essentials and hours-long power outages—have reached a turning point with the powerful intervention of the working class. This has been demonstrated by the participation of millions of workers throughout the country from all sectors—government, private and para-public—and cutting across communal lines—Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian—in two one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6, and the latest general strike that erupted on May 9 following the government-instigated goon attack on protesters demanding the resignation of the president and his government. This is all the more significant given the decades-long record of all parties of the bourgeois political establishment to whip up various forms of communalism to divide and weaken the working class.

4. The ongoing anti-government uprising of workers and oppressed masses in Sri Lanka is part of an international upsurge of the working class, which has emerged against the onslaught of attacks unleashed by

the governments and corporations on the basic social and democratic rights of workers through the imposition of the immense economic crisis of global capitalism, highly intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia. As is the case globally, the popular uprising in Sri Lanka has further deepened the political crisis of the Rajapakse government and bourgeois rule.

5. The brutal attack carried out by goons organised by the Rajapakse government against anti-government protesters outside Temple Trees, the prime minister's official residence, and the main protest site at Galle Face Green on May 9, has indicated the vicious plans prepared by the government, behind the scenes, to unleash a major crackdown on the protesters. This was the part of the government's plan to intensify its moves towards dictatorial forms of rule, based on the military and police. The conduct of the police deployed at Galle Face Green in allowing club-wielding thugs to enter the protest site, destroy structures and brutally attack protesters, has been a powerful lesson for working people, showing that they will not have any protection from these sections of the bourgeois state, including the police and the military. Instead, the real role of the military and police is to defend bourgeois rule by suppressing any opposition from working people and the oppressed masses, as clearly shown again by the police shooting on unarmed protesters against higher fuel prices in Rambukkana, killing one worker, Chaminda Lakshan, and injuring dozens.

6. The May 9 goon attack clearly underscores the grave danger confronting the masses in their more than one-month long struggle against the government and, most importantly, the urgency for an independent political intervention of the working class to defend itself and the oppressed people from such attacks by government-instigated goons and the bourgeois state, the police and the military. This is also urgently necessary to secure working people's basic rights and needs, including supplies of essentials used in everyday life, such as food, medicine and fuel. To spearhead the struggle of the working class for these requirements workers action committees, independent of the unions and all parties of the political establishment and their pseudo-left hangers on, need to be formed at all factories, workplaces, plantations and neighborhoods. This congress resolves to redouble the SEP's struggle to build action committees throughout the island, further expanding the party's initiative already taken in forming such committees among plantation and health workers, educators and artists. The party must be ready to provide maximum political assistance to working people, youth and students who take the initiative to establish action committees.

7. The powerful intervention by the working class into the ongoing anti-government uprising, and its potential threat for entire bourgeois rule, has

terrified not only the Rajapakse government but also its parliamentary opposition, mainly the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). With the help of their pseudo-left hangers on and the unions, the opposition parties have busied themselves trying to piece together an alternative capitalist government in the form of an “interim” or “all-party” or “national unity” government, to trap the popular movement. The SEP strongly warns the working class that any such alternative capitalist government will not solve any of the acute problems confronting the workers, youth and rural poor. In the epoch of the decay of global capitalism, the bourgeoisie is totally incapable of assuring any social or democratic right to the masses. That is why they threaten to establish military dictatorship and fascism internally and unleash a third world war internationally.

8. The working class cannot trust any party of the bourgeois political establishment, none of which has economic and political policies fundamentally different from those of the Rajapakse coalition government. They all are committed to defend bourgeois class rule at any cost and will continue with austerity measures as dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The SJB has criticised the Rajapakse government for not approaching the IMF earlier, while the JVP and the Frontline Socialist Party have signalled their backing for the IMF’s austerity measures and its debt restructuring program.

9. As elaborated in its statement of April 7, the SEP, while standing “squarely behind the demands of working people: ‘Gota has got to go!’ ” has starkly raised the main issue that flows from this demand of the anti-government protest movement: “What is to replace him?” It then continues, “It is not enough to demand Rajapakse’s removal,” adding as “a key step in addressing the current political crisis, the SEP demands the immediate abolition of the executive presidency, which, with its sweeping autocratic powers, holds a gun to the heads of the working class.”

10. The SEP also warns the working class against the “no politics” directive made by organisers of the Galle Face protests, which reflects the dangerous political orientation of that movement. While reflecting the widespread hostility among the working people, youth and rural toilers towards all the parties of the bourgeois political establishment, drawn from their bitter experience of more than seven decades of rule under those parties, the slogan of “no politics” is used consciously to exclude the revolutionary socialist politics the working class needs to base itself on its struggle against bourgeois rule. It will politically disarm them before the brutal onslaught on their social and democratic rights by the Rajapakse government and the ruling class. While correctly rejecting all forms of reactionary bourgeois politics, working people, youth and rural toilers urgently need an alternative socialist political perspective and program to fight the Rajapakse regime and bourgeois rule.

11. The whole experience of working-class struggles in past years, and particularly the current anti-government popular movement, has clearly revealed the treacherous role of the trade unions in Sri Lanka as an industrial police force acting on behalf of the government and employers, like their counterparts internationally. The unions have worked to suppress the growing class struggle and when strikes have emerged, despite their efforts to prevent them, they have worked to betray them, seizing on bogus promises made by the government and employers. This was the case in the more than 100-day strike by government school teachers last year, and also during repeated strikes by public health sector and plantation workers. The unions have all maintained a deathly silence about Rajapakse’s repressive Essential Public Service Act which has banned strikes in the majority of the public sector.

12. The unions kept silent for weeks about the current and still growing popular protests against the Rajapakse government, treacherously blocking any independent intervention of the working class into this immense crisis situation. Having been forced to call two general strikes on April 28 and May 6 due to growing pressure from workers, the unions

worked to limit those protest strike actions to one day. They later withdrew their earlier call for an indefinite general strike from May 11, thus strengthening the hands of the much-weakened Rajapakse government, allowing it to proceed with its brutal plans for repression, including the May 9 goon attack. The unions were forced to a call general strike on the evening of May 9 only after workers from several sections, including at the Colombo National Hospital and the Postal Department, began indefinite strikes upon learning about the attack. The unions, just two days later, have now also decided to call off the latest general strike, ordering workers to return to work, thus giving the Rajapakse government and the ruling class the upper hand to go ahead with their reactionary plans for suppressing the popular uprising of working people and oppressed masses. This entire bitter experience of workers with the treacherous role of unions strongly underscores the need for the workers to break from the unions and take matters into their own hands through the formation of action committees.

13. As elaborated in series of party statements issued from April 7 to May 10, and in response to the most recent events, the SEP advocates a “program and policies to animate the work of the Action Committees to address the pressing needs of the masses.” These include: workers’ democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential items and other resources critical for the lives of the people; cancellation of the debts of small farmers, fishermen, small industrialists and businessmen; the nationalisation of the banks, big corporations, plantations and other major economic nerve centres; repudiation of all foreign debts; and no to the austerity demands of the IMF and World Bank.

14. The struggle of the working class, organised through action committees on the above program and policies to rally poor peasants and other oppressed masses, is needed to be developed towards the establishment of a government of workers and peasants committed to the policies of socialist internationalism. This fight of the Sri Lankan working class is part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally, and will be conducted with the unity of their class brothers in South Asia and globally.

15. The working class needs to maintain and further consolidate its unity across communal divisions—clearly expressed in the current anti-government uprising—countering the attempts by the Rajapakse government and other sections of the ruling class to whip up various forms of communalism. The SEP must fight to politically arm the working class on the basis of the program and perspective of international socialism to provide the necessary political articulation for this objective class unity and solidarity.

16. The SEP must take the initiative in enjoining the Sri Lankan working class to make a special appeal to their class brothers in India, the rest of the South Asia and internationally for support in its decisive battle against the Rajapakse government and bourgeois rule as a whole. On March 28–29, tens of millions of workers throughout India joined a general strike against similar pro-investor economic reforms and austerity measures carried out by the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This was the latest in a series of struggles entered into by the Indian working class in the past period. These developments provide a powerful basis for the unity of the working class in Sri Lanka and India in their common struggle against bourgeois rule.

17. The Sri Lankan working class can draw valuable lessons from the courageous revolutionary struggle waged by its class brothers and sisters in Egypt in 2011, which was brutally betrayed by an amalgam of the bourgeois Muslim Brotherhood and the pseudo-left Revolutionary Socialists (RS), paving the way for a military dictatorship. Although the popular uprising of workers and the oppressed masses was able to overthrow the decades-long dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the military was able to take power under Mubarak’s former Defence

Minister Muhammad Tantawi, facilitated by the RS which politically subordinated the working class to sections of the national bourgeoisie and promoted illusions in the military. In elections held under military rule in 2012, the RS worked to divert popular opposition behind the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), helping it come to power. When mass anger developed against the MB government in 2013, the RS again backed the military, which then came to power through a coup led by Mubarak's former General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. He has ruled Egypt ever since through a bloody dictatorship, detaining over 60,000 political prisoners and executing thousands in crackdowns on political opponents. Rajapakse's continuous manoeuvres to reshuffle the government, while mobilising the armed forces on the streets, and the connivance of the parliamentary parties, including the JVP, and the treacherous role played by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party, allows a rerun of these processes in Sri Lanka. To put a stop to such a catastrophe, the task now is to build the already-existing SEP, the section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in South Asia, as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.

18. From the beginning of this year, the working class has entered into unending struggles, including strikes and protests around globe—in the US, Europe, Australia, Africa and Latin America, etc.—for decent wages, better working and living conditions and against ruling class moves forcing them to work under dangerous unsafe pandemic conditions and similar shortages and skyrocketing prices of essentials triggered by US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. The Sri Lankan working class need to see its struggles against the brutal assault of the Rajapakse government on their social and democratic rights as part of this growing upsurge of the international working class and orient to and unite with that international movement. For that, the independent action committees being built by Sri Lankan workers need to link up with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

19. What is most crucial in this extraordinary political situation is the building of the SEP as the mass revolutionary party of the working class. Towards that aim, the SEP must further develop its political and theoretical struggle for international socialism, building on the important advances achieved through the continuous active political intervention of party cadres among workers, youth and rural toilers during the current popular uprising.



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