

The pandemic, the global crisis of capitalism, the resurgence of class struggles and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 2

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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Part one / Part three

This is the second part of the main resolution adopted by the Third National Congress of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, which was held online from May 14–16, 2022.

The SEP Congress also adopted an emergency resolution “Popular uprising against the Rajapakse government and the tasks of the SEP.”

Crisis of the Sri Lankan ruling elite, shift toward autocratic rule and the upsurge in class struggle

30. As in every corner of the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has sharply intensified the crisis of the Sri Lankan capitalist class and President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government. The economy is beset with multiple problems, whilst anger is mounting among workers, rural poor and youth of all communities, against the attacks on their social and democratic rights. The geopolitical tensions provoked by the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific region with China are a major factor increasing the Sri Lankan elite’s political crisis.

31. The Rajapakse government has criminally disregarded the impact of the pandemic on Sri Lanka since it surfaced in early 2020, making nationalist declamations that the country, on its own, could manage the situation. It was compelled to lock down the country on March 20, 2020 but began reopening the economy after one month at the behest of international finance capital and big business. Since then, when new waves of infections have emerged, the government has rejected calls by independent health experts for drastic health measures, only resorting to limited restrictions. When the Delta variant of COVID-19 began taking thousands of lives and the dilapidated health service began crumbling, the government had to impose a six-week lockdown from August 20, 2021. From beginning of September to the end of October 2021, the death toll jumped from 9,400 to over 13,600. On October 25, 2021, the toll was 13,640 deaths and 536,645 infected. In the face of the pandemic, the government did not take any significant steps to overhaul the public healthcare system, which has been rundown drastically during the past four decades. The budgetary allocation for the health service for 2021 and 2022 has been cut by 30 and 6 billion rupees, respectively.

32. Rajapakse followed the “herd immunity” policy. In December 2020, he told a business summit that the government was balancing “containing the virus on the one hand and ensuring continued economic activity on the other. We must all adapt to this new normal.” Following the policy of prioritising profits over human lives, the government has kept open even non-essential services since mid-April 2020. Rajapakse declared vaccination to be “the only solution.” On October 7, he again told top state officials that the country should learn to live with the “new normal”

and, that during next three years of his tenure, he would take drastic actions to revive the economy. The government then began reopening schools even without the vaccination of children under 12.

The working class must reject the policy of “living with pandemic” dictated by the global financial oligarchy and domestic big business. In line with its sister parties, the SEP in Sri Lanka fights for the science-based policy of ending the pandemic globally through elimination and eradication, which is the only solution to the catastrophe.

33. Rajapakse won the November 2019 presidential election, exploiting the mass discontent against the previous pro-US “unity” government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. For the ruling elite in extreme political crisis, the ex-colonel Rajapakse—who, as defence secretary, supervised the bloody end of the thirty-year anti-Tamil civil war of successive Colombo regimes—promised a “stable” and “strong” government. Rajapakse and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) seized upon the terror attacks on Easter Sunday 2019 by a terrorist, ISIS-backed Islamic extremist group that killed hundreds to launch his campaign of “national security first.” Leading an anti-Muslim campaign and promoting racist propaganda against the Tamil minority, Rajapakse rallied fascist Sinhala-Buddhist groups and sections within the military. He was able to win the election because of the treachery of the “left” parties, including the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), United Socialist Party (USP) and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). They helped to divert the social opposition against the previous regime into the rotten framework of electoral and protest politics, opposing the independent mobilisation of the working class against capitalist rule, the program fought for only by the SEP.

34. President Rajapakse’s efforts were concentrated on strengthening the base for a presidential dictatorship. He began the militarisation of the state administration, appointing retired and in-service generals to key positions, including retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne as defence secretary. The taskforce dealing with COVID-19 was placed under Army Commander, Shavendra Silva, in order to implement the government’s pro-big business policies. In October 2020, the ruling SLPP pushed the 20th Amendment to the constitution through parliament, restoring the full autocratic executive presidential powers contained in the 1978 constitution. As of now, a new constitution is being prepared to concentrate more powers in the hands of the president. The recent move to establish a task force for “one country one law” to change the country’s laws, under the chairmanship of Buddhist monk Galagodaaththe Gnanasara, the leader of the notorious anti-Muslim extremist outfit named Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Power Force), is also a step toward whipping

up racial provocations and a dictatorship.

35. The government's main concern is "reviving" the economy, which is in shambles, impacted by the worst global crisis of capitalism. Sri Lanka's GDP growth rate declined to negative 3.6 percent in 2020, unprecedented since the 1948 independence. Exports and foreign remittances have declined while tourism has almost collapsed. The country is on the brink of default on foreign loans. While taking out more loans to repay the existing debts, the Central Bank has printed more than 2 trillion rupees during the past 18 months to offset the state revenue shortfall, fuelling inflation and devaluing the rupee by 13 percent in official US dollar terms since January 2020. The World Bank predicted growth could "recover" to 3.3 percent of GDP in 2021, but indicated uncertainties were prevalent.

36. The government launched a series of measures to boost big companies. It released 278 billion rupees through the Central Bank to increase the lending capacity of the commercial banks. For several months it lowered bank rates to around 4 percent, and loans were issued without collateral, with the state bearing the cost of non-repayment. More concessions were announced to attract foreign capital, including tax exemptions and allowing dividend transfers, and cheap labour conditions promoted.

37. In contrast, workers and poor have been thrown into an immense social crisis. Around 68 percent of the Sri Lankan workforce is employed in the informal sector, having precarious jobs without social protection. The Institute of Policy Studies has found that 1.5 million of these workers face a high risk of falling into poverty. In many factories, wages and overtime payments have been cut while extending the working day beyond the statutory eight hours. The World Bank has estimated that over 500,000 have fallen into poverty as a result of the crisis, which led to "an increase in the \$3.20 poverty rate from 9.2 percent in 2019 to 11.7 percent in 2020."

38. The government has begun imposing a new round of austerity. In September and October, it removed the long-standing control price system for rice, wheat flour, milk powder, cooking gas and cement, shooting up the price of these goods by 10 to 80 percent. This is a new stage in allowing market forces to dictate prices, which began in 1977 when the country was integrated into the US-led global capitalist economy, and in the scrapping of any limited social protections for the poor. Allowing rampant inflation to drive down real wages and the meagre income of working people, this ruthless policy is directed at promoting cheap-labour conditions to attract FDI and promote profit interests. Further privatisation of key sectors, such as the ports, electricity and energy sources, has also been initiated. The China-funded Colombo Port City, set up on reclaimed land near the Colombo port, has been declared the first special economic zone, almost entirely free from the country's legal system.

39. The authorities took the same brutal attitude toward migrant workers, limiting the return of those who opted to do so due to the pandemic, particularly those toiling in the Middle East. Desperate to earn remittances, the Rajapakse regime discouraged their return. One million Sri Lankans are among the multi-million migrant workers ruthlessly exploited in these countries under autocratic rulers.

40. A new stage of resistance of the Sri Lankan working class has begun against these attacks. It is an integral part of the global resurgence of class struggles. The past ten months saw protests and strikes erupt in the state sectors, such as health, education, ports, postal and railways. More than 250,000 teachers held their longest ever strike for higher wages, lasting until the last week of October, 2021, only to be betrayed by the unions. Tens of thousands of state health workers engaged in a series of struggles, demanding safe working conditions and facilities. Workers in tea and rubber plantations have engaged in struggles, opposing wage cuts, onerous workloads and police repression. Unrest is also developing among garment workers, opposing unsafe working conditions, wage and job cuts

and increased working hours.

41. An island-wide massive protest movement has erupted in rural areas in Sri Lanka since September against the government's ban on imports of fertiliser, which has severely disrupted paddy, vegetable and minor crop cultivation. This unrest indicates the deep-going anger accumulated over years among the oppressed rural masses over poverty and unemployment, indebtedness and exploitation by usurers, banks and the multinationals with the blessing of successive regimes. Many young people who migrated to cities have lost their jobs, increasing youth unemployment in rural areas. Poor fishing communities are also facing indebtedness, exploitation by middlemen and the intrusion of multinationals into the fishing industry. A mass of unemployed workers has emerged in rural areas. The pandemic has intensified the crisis of all these sections.

Building action committees among rural labourers will be a rallying point for poor farmers and winning them to the side of working class against the capitalist oppressors— thwarting attempts by the bourgeois parties to take them under their wing. The working class is the only revolutionary force that can liberate the rural poor and the oppressed masses from the yoke of capitalism and prepare the ground for addressing their problems through its fight for socialism. However, the working class can provide such a leadership to the rural poor and the oppressed only by standing up as an independent political force, breaking from every section of the bourgeoisie.

42. The SEP is the only political party in Sri Lanka that warned from the outset about the pandemic as a major disaster that could be addressed only by a political struggle of the working class and in unity with its international counterparts. Based on the ICFI's analysis, the SEP issued a statement as early as March 21, 2020 through the WSWS, that explained that combatting the "escalating disaster requires the international mobilisation of all scientific and technological assets, massive financial resources and the provision of freely accessible healthcare for all... Rational planning across the national borders can be made only on the basis of a socialist reorganisation of the world economy." As part of this struggle and the fight for international socialism, the SEP advanced the program for a workers' and peasants' government.

43. The SEP warned against the reopening of the economy and sending hundreds of thousands of workers back into unsafe factories and workplaces. The party demanded billions of rupees to develop public health services and called for workers to form "their own factory and workplace action committees, independent of the trade unions, to fight for these demands" ("Sri Lanka: Oppose return to work in unsafe pandemic conditions! No to job destruction!" April 18, 2020). Vindicating the SEP's warnings, workplaces, particularly the garment factories, became hotbeds for coronavirus. The party's continued campaign in opposing forced work in factories, denouncing the unions' backing for the companies, won workers' wide attention.

44. Nervous about the rising class struggles, the Rajapakse regime imposed the Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) in May and a state of emergency in August, 2021. Under the draconian EPSA, the government has banned industrial action, including strikes. Violation or inducement to violate this repressive law carries rigorous punishments. The draconian emergency law was imposed on the pretext of preventing food shortages and hoarding, and controlling prices. The Sri Lankan ruling elite has a past record of using emergency measures—40 years out of the 73 years since independence—to crush workers' struggles and conduct its bloody anti-Tamil civil war and rural massacres. Only the SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), fought against these repressions, advancing a program to mobilise the working class against this law and its repeated invocation. Similarly, only the SEP has taken the initiative in the present pandemic context to explain the renewed dangers to the working class and introduce a program to fight the repressive laws with the support of international class brothers and sisters.

45. The ruling party, opposition parties and their Sinhala chauvinist allies are intensifying their communal campaigns against the Tamil and Muslim minorities to divide and weaken the working class. The Easter Sunday attack in 2019 by an Islamic extremist group is being used for continued provocations against Muslims. They were blamed for spreading the virus, and the forcible cremation of the bodies of Muslims who died from COVID-19 was imposed to inflame ethnic tensions. The public security minister, retired Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekara, told the parliament on September 22: “Until the IS[IS] ideology prevails, any Muslim youth could carry out a terrorist attack.” Against Tamils, a campaign has been mounted on the claim of the “revival of LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] terrorism.” Several hundred Muslims, including party leaders, human rights activists and the young poet Ahnaf Jazeem, and Tamil journalists, have been arrested under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) since 2020. The weapon of vicious communal incitement has been used by the Sri Lankan ruling class in every stage of its crisis since 1948 and culminated in the thirty-year civil war that began in 1983. The war against the LTTE brutally ended in May 2009, killing tens of thousands of civilians and inflicting untold devastation on the country. Nevertheless, the ruling class needs communal poison, as never before, in the new stage of its crisis.

46. The political crisis of the Rajapakse regime and the ruling elite has been exacerbated by the geopolitical rivalries in the region. At the centre of these geopolitical tensions is Washington’s continued threats against China. The US and its ally in the region, India, demand that Sri Lanka keep in line with their strategic interests. Since Gotabhaya Rajapakse sought increasing financial assistance from Beijing, Washington has warned him not to ally with China. As Colombo moved to make operational the China-funded Colombo Port City, which Beijing considers part of its Belt and Road Initiative to counter US threats in the Indian Ocean region, Washington pushed through a resolution at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in March 2021, raising war crimes issues related to the final months of the civil war. This is part of its pressure on Colombo to break ties with Beijing. The UN Human Rights High Commissioner has requested member states to proceed with charges against those responsible for war crimes. In 2015, the US used Sri Lanka’s war crimes to put pressure on then President Mahinda Rajapakse and orchestrated a regime-change operation to oust him from power when he failed to distance his government from China. As the SEP has repeatedly explained, the US and other major imperialist powers, which are responsible for numerous war crimes, are not concerned over democratic rights in Sri Lanka or any other country but only in advancing their strategic interests.

Seeking to appease Washington, Colombo is maintaining the Sri Lankan military’s integration into the US Indo-Pacific Command, begun during the previous regime. Recently, the Rajapakse government has allowed the US to invest in key large-scale sectors. The US-led aggressive actions against China indicate the intensification of the war threat, which can be prevented only by the international working class.

47. The Sri Lankan opposition parties have no fundamental differences with the government’s criminal policy on the pandemic, moves toward autocratic rule and imposition of the burden of the economic crisis on working people. Calibrated “criticisms” by these parties of the government are aimed at derailing and suppressing social opposition. The UNP, Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), Tamil National Alliance (TNA), JVP and Muslim parties, and plantation unions attended all-party meetings called by the prime minister in 2020 and praised the president’s response to COVID-19, while offering their assistance and support for the reopening of the economy. They have not opposed Rajapakse’s militarisation of the administration nor challenged his racist campaign against minorities. The common fear of the ruling and opposition parties is that the growing social anger among workers across ethnic lines will

threaten capitalist rule. These opposition parties indicated their anti-China positions, in line with Washington’s interests, when the Colombo Port City was made operational. The SJB and JVP (shedding its occasional anti-imperialist rhetoric) openly criticised the government for “allowing a Chinese territory in the country.” Workers cannot and will not find any constituency among any of these parties to defend their democratic or social aspirations.

48. The historical crisis of the capitalist elite in Sri Lanka has been sharply expressed by the collapse of the traditional bourgeois parties—the UNP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). They alternately governed the country from 1948. The UNP was able to win only one seat and its national vote share plummeted to just 250,000 in the last general elections. The UNP split in February 2020, with the majority of its MPs forming the SJB. The SLFP, led by former President Sirisena, is all but defunct. It is in a front with the ruling SLPP, formed in 2016 by a section of SLFP MPs. These parties, mired in Sinhala communalism, are discredited among the masses because of their responsibility for attacks on democratic and social rights and anti-Tamil communalism and war. Amid political instability, a major section of the ruling elite turned to Rajapakse and the SLPP to support dictatorial rule, hoping to use it to defeat the working class.

49. The Tamil bourgeois nationalist parties—including the TNA, Tamil Peoples Alliance and Tamil National People’s Front—have further shifted to the right amid the pandemic crisis. They have lined up with Washington’s new moves to bring Colombo firmly into its strategic orbit against China. As part of this, with the TNA in the lead, they supported the US-sponsored resolution moved at the UNHRC in March 2021.

The TNA, formed in 2002, backed the LTTE’s appeals to Washington. It allied with the UNP to support the US-led regime-change operation in 2015 to oust Mahinda Rajapakse and helped maintain the pro-US Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime in power until 2019. The Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK), the principal party of the TNA, was formed in 1949 in response to the anti-Tamil communal policy of the Sinhala ruling elite and presented itself as the defender of Tamil nationalism. It has a sordid history of attempting to secure power-sharing arrangements with successive Colombo regimes. Showing class unity, the TNA does not oppose the autocratic moves of Rajapakse. Like the Colombo regime and the ruling elite, the Tamil parties are in mortal fear of the objective unity of the Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers shown in their class struggles. Their nationalist politics are directed at dividing the working class on ethnic lines, serving the Colombo regime’s communal provocations. None of the Tamil parties represent the democratic rights of the Tamil masses. They are serving the geostrategic interests of US imperialism, hoping thereby to secure the interests of the Tamil elite.

50. The SEP has explained that the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009 was not principally a military issue but a result of its bankrupt national separatist policy, which was based on ethnic exclusivism, counting on the support of the major powers, including the US and India, to carve out a separate state. Washington is not averse to backing separatist groups when they can be used for its geopolitical interests. However, Washington opposed the LTTE’s call for an independent Tamil state in the north and east, and supported crushing it on geopolitical calculations that its separatism would destabilise India, which is Washington’s main strategic ally in the region.

51. The policies of the Tamil parties, like the LTTE, are based on the “right to self-determination.” While the LTTE directly demanded the carving out of a separate state, the TNA and the other parties that supported it until its 2009 defeat now demand the devolution of power or a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo regime. The TNA explains this as “internal self-determination” and warns that persistent denial of it will “legitimise external self-determination,” that is the demand for a separate state. Whatever its form, this “right to self-determination” is tied to seeking US imperialism’s support by backing its

interests.

The Sri Lankan pseudo-left parties, such as the USP and NSSP, and some ex-radicals support this pro-imperialist campaign of the Tamil bourgeois parties in the name of supporting the Tamil people's democratic rights, including self-determination. The fake-left USP and NSSP seek to legitimise this support by falsely invoking Lenin. Not surprisingly, these groups, similar to the Tamil parties, support the bogus human rights campaign of the US, which is the number one war criminal and violator of democratic rights internationally, as well as domestically.

52. The SEP rejects the claims of the Tamil parties and the middle-class groups that their invocation of self-determination represents the democratic rights of the Tamil people. The claims of these middle-class groups have nothing to do with Marxism. In a series of seminal analyses, which include its 1998 statement *Globalisation and the International Working Class*, the ICFI has explained that the sharp changes in the world economy with the globalisation of production have undermined all nationally-based programs and made all nationalist organisations shift further to the right. Further, those "national liberation movements" which were formed after the Second World War have never championed the unity of all ethnic communities and their democratic rights.

As the ICFI explained in the above statement: "For Lenin, the right to national self-determination had one meaning and one meaning only—the right to form a separate, independent state. He repeatedly insisted that this right had for the Bolshevik Party a 'negative' connotation. That is, in recognising this right, the Bolsheviks did not advocate national separatism as a preferred course of action."

On the basis of the same historical-materialist method on which Lenin made his conclusions, the ICFI explained the meaning of national self-determination in a different historical period:

"It has often been the case in the history of the Marxist movement that formulations and slogans which had a progressive and revolutionary content in one period take on an entirely different meaning in another. National self-determination presents just such a case.

"The right to self-determination has come to mean something very different from the way in which Lenin defined it more than eighty years ago. It is not only the Marxists who have advanced the right to self-determination, but the national bourgeoisie in the backward countries and the imperialists themselves. From the end of World War I on, this 'right' has been invoked by one or another imperialist power to justify schemes aimed at the partition of existing territories."

53. The RCL, which became the SEP in 1996, is the only party in Sri Lanka whose program and practice are based on this analysis. The SEP-RCL consistently opposed the anti-Tamil war, demanded the withdrawal of the military from the north and east and fought for the internationalist and socialist unity of all workers across ethnic lines. This struggle has been developed on the basis of the ICFI statement issued on November 19, 1987 titled, "The Situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the Revolutionary Communist League," which called for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and the struggle for international socialism. This perspective has been thoroughly vindicated during the past 34 years.

54. The resurgent class struggles in Sri Lanka demand the SEP's systematic and active political intervention to develop its base within the working class, particularly among its key sections. These struggles are developing over the heads of the trade unions or in opposition to them. Like their counterparts internationally, the Sri Lankan unions have been

transformed into tools of the state and finance capital. They are terrified by the growing social opposition triggered by the pandemic. In the Colombo Port, the unions directly collaborated with racist groups to divert workers' struggle against privatisation into an anti-Indian campaign and made a deal with the government to scuttle the workers' struggle. In the plantations, the unions are directly working with the companies to increase workloads, impose wage and job cuts and suppress militant workers. In reopening the economy and sending workers back on the job in unsafe pandemic conditions, the unions fully backed the government and big business. Union bureaucrats are regularly sitting with state officials and the company bosses to discuss slashing jobs and wages, while preventing struggles. Attacks on the social and living conditions have been produced by the global crisis and instigated by international finance capital. The SEP should deepen its struggle by assisting workers to break from these corporatist agencies of the capitalist class and the state, and build their own action committees at workplaces under the banner of the IWA-RFC to develop the class struggle.

55. The pandemic crisis has exposed the rightward shift of pseudo-left groups in Sri Lanka, as part of an international process. The extreme expression of this shift is the NSSP. After decades of close collaboration with the right-wing UNP, this fake-left group contested the general election in 2020 under the UNP's ticket. The international Pabloite group—the United Secretariat of the Fourth International—backed the treacherous politics of the NSSP, which was its official section. Nearly six decades ago, the Pabloites prepared the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which entered Sirimavo Bandaranaike's bourgeois government, completely abandoning international socialist principles. This betrayal brought to the working people one disaster after another, including the 30-year bloody communal war. The NSSP's degeneration epitomises the role of Pabloites internationally as agents of imperialism ("Pseudo-left Fourth International Bureau announces suspension of NSSP," WSWS, November 25, 2020). After abandoning this discredited and degenerated party, the Pabloite bureau has now enlisted Left Voice, a breakaway faction of the NSSP, as its Sri Lankan "section." It has been organised in order to derail workers and youth, now coming into struggle against capitalism, and prevent them from turning to Trotskyism.

56. The pseudo-left FSP has shown its allegiance to capitalist rule and lined up with extreme right-wing chauvinist and fascistic forces. In April 2020, it wrote to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse offering the party's support for the government's supposed efforts to fight the pandemic "notwithstanding differences." After supporting the reopening of the economy, FSP union leader Duminda Nagamuwa met with the labour minister to discuss the "problems of workers" due to the pandemic and publicly declared that the minister was ready to solve them. In early 2021, when Colombo Port workers launched an agitation against the privatisation of one of the port's terminals, through the sale of the majority of its shares to an Indian company, the FSP joined the port unions and Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist groups to launch an anti-Indian campaign to derail the workers' struggle against privatisation.

The FSP admired Syriza in Greece and PODEMOS in Spain, which betrayed the working class in those respective countries, and is treading the same path. In the past several months this party started talks with the SLFP, the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party—all partners in Rajapakse's ruling coalition. The FSP controlled Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF) talks with the SJB. Fearful about revolutionary developments, the FSP seeks to forge a broad alliance with bourgeois and pro-capitalist parties and unions to politically trap workers and the poor.

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