

To oppose IMF austerity, Sri Lankan workers must draw the lessons of past two months of popular uprising

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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Since early April, Sri Lanka has been convulsed by mass protests, demonstrations and strikes as workers, rural toilers and young people rebel against the intolerable living conditions produced by the global capitalist crisis.

In this mass uprising, the working class has increasingly come to the fore, demonstrating its immense social power. Millions of workers participated in one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6 that united Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, thereby cutting across the ethnic-communal divisions the ruling class has systematically fomented for decades.

This mass upsurge has been galvanised by the demand that President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government must be forced from power and emergency measures taken to put an end to unprecedented price rises, shortages of essential goods, and power outages.

Objectively this movement is a challenge not just to Rajapakse and his government, but to the entire political establishment and their paymasters, big business and global capital—all of whom are adamant that working people must be made to pay for the capitalist crisis.

The popular uprising has shaken the government and the entire Sri Lankan ruling class. It has raised fears in capitals around the world of the eruption of mass opposition driven by a global capitalist crisis that has been compounded first by the COVID-19 pandemic and now by the US-NATO war on Russia.

Yet despite the scope, power and militancy of the mass movement, President Rajapakse remains in power and working people under unprecedented attack. Mahinda Rajapakse was replaced as prime minister by the United National Party's (UNP) lone MP, Ranil Wickremesinghe, a pro-US hack dedicated to imposing the IMF austerity program and class war policies.

The Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe regime has now initiated a new round of social attacks that will dwarf all that has come before, threatening to transform the calamitous conditions now being experienced by the masses into a social catastrophe.

Two weeks ago, the government raised the value added tax (VAT) by 4 percentage points and imposed 25 to 850 percent surcharges, causing prices of many essentials to skyrocket. The income tax net has been widened to extract taxes from significant sections of working people hitherto excluded because their incomes were so low.

The government has begun the process of slashing 800,000 public sector jobs and pension benefits. The privatisation and corporatisation of state enterprises is on the agenda. Already Sri Lankan Airlines, the national carrier, has been placed on the chopping block.

These measures are further fuelling inflation, creating conditions in which workers and the rural poor are unable to access the essentials of life. Officially, the inflation rate in May reached 38 percent, and food

inflation was 57 percent. Hunger is rampant. A recent UN report noted at least 70 percent of the population are reducing meals, including skipping one meal a day.

The slashing of jobs, wages, pensions and subsidies will push the poverty rate to at least 22.8 percent next year, according to the World Bank. The IMF, for its part, calculates that as a result of the combined impact of global crisis and massive cuts to state expenditure, Sri Lanka's economy will contract by 6 percent this year.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has welcomed the mass upsurge and joined it, but it has done so from the standpoint of mobilising the working class as an independent political force, advancing its own solution to the social catastrophe. Such a solution begins from the needs of the masses, not from what the politicians and business leaders claim is affordable within the confines of bankrupt Sri Lankan and global capitalism.

We have urged workers to build their own action committees in every workplace and neighbourhood to mobilise their class strength in the fight for a socialist program of action.

The urgency of this struggle is more important today than ever. The mass upsurge has an immense social emancipatory potential. But if that potential is to be realised and the working class to defeat the scorched-earth economic agenda of the Sri Lankan ruling class and the IMF, it must draw the lessons of the past two-months. It must politically separate itself from all those forces that seek to confine it within the straitjacket of capitalist politics and pleas to the ruling class for slightly bigger famine rations.

What are the essential lessons?

It is necessary to make an appraisal of the essential forces that are blocking the development of a coordinated offensive of the working class.

The trade unions

There is, first of all, the trade unions, which are not instruments of waging class struggle, but rather appendages of the employers and politicians for suppressing it.

For weeks the unions tried to keep the working class away from the anti-government protests. When they authorised the one-day general strikes, they did so reluctantly, in the face of mass anger, and with the aim of politically derailing the workers.

The pro-capitalist unions are organised in two fronts: the Trade Union Coordination Committee (TUCC) and the United Trade Unions and Mass Organisations (UTUMO). They have linked the demand "President Rajapakse and his government must go" to calls for an interim regime of

capitalist parties in the parliament and general elections. These demands have been advanced by the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the Tamil National Alliance and big business to derail the mass opposition and chain it to the rotten parliamentary framework.

These unions have a sordid history of scuttling the strikes and protests that erupted in 2021 and this year, not to mention their previous betrayals. The May 6 general strike involving millions of workers, backed by a hartal involving the poor, oppressed masses and small businesses, shook the political establishment and trade unions to the core.

The union fronts responded to this demonstration of working-class power by cancelling an already announced indefinite general strike to start on May 11. This gave President Rajapakse a political opening and he then declared a state of emergency, granting himself wider powers to suppress the working class and anti-government protests.

In a calculated provocation on May 9, incited by then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, goons were let loose against anti-government protesters at Galle Face Green in Colombo. Unhindered by the police, they brutally attacked the demonstrators and smashed their temporary huts. Outraged over these thug attacks, port and health workers took immediate strike action and marched to Galle Face Green. Fearing this spontaneous action could escalate out of their control, the unions were compelled to call an indefinite strike.

On May 9, as retaliatory riots erupted across the country in opposition to the thug attacks on protesters, Rajapakse deployed the military, issuing “shoot on sight” orders against the so-called rioters. Afraid that their indefinite strike would produce a direct political confrontation with the government, the trade unions capitulated and halted all industrial action.

Three days later, on May 12, Rajapakse appointed UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe prime minister. An SEP statement published the next day warned: “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.”

Thus, the political conditions for this new round of attacks on the working class and the oppressed masses were made possible by the trade unions, which blocked the mobilisation of workers class in a unified political and industrial struggle against the Rajapakse regime.

Role of the SJB and the JVP

The main parliamentary opposition party, the SJB, as well as the JVP and the Tamil National Alliance, have no fundamental differences with Rajapakse’s austerity policies. While the SJB proposes an “all-party interim regime,” the JVP is calling for a “consensus regime” with other parties after President Rajapakse steps down.

These calls are a facade to cover up their fundamental unity with the Colombo ruling elite and that they have no alternative to the IMF dictates. This was exposed last week when they both supported Wickremesinghe’s increases in VAT and other tax measures.

The communalist JVP claims that the catastrophe in Sri Lanka is a result of individual corruption and fraud to hide the fact that the real source of the crisis is capitalism. It remains hypocritically silent on the new austerity measures but demands the implementation of Greek-style cutbacks implemented in that country since 2015 as ordered by the European Union and the IMF.

While the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) postures as a left-wing alternative, its program is not fundamentally different from the parliamentary opposition parties. The FSP proposes a so-called consensus regime of the parliamentary parties after President Rajapakse steps down, insisting that workers and youth can defend their democratic and social rights by pressuring the ruling regime with mass protests.

The pseudo-left FSP directly collaborates with the trade unions and their efforts to prevent the working class moving in a revolutionary direction. Its so-called “Class Struggle Group” operates at several workplaces and is part of the UTUMO and backs its betrayals.

“Gota Gogama” protests

While the self-described “Gota Gogama” protesters at Galle Face Green have been demanding the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government since early April, they have not said what sort of regime should replace Rajapakse. Nor have they presented any program to resolve the immense social problems confronting the masses.

The middle-class groups dominating the Galle Face protests have, however, revealed their political bankruptcy. One group demands the president and prime minister “must go home” but refuses to answer the question: What next? Another group, which is now playing a more dominant role, is calling for an interim capitalist regime, debt restructuring and ending corruption, echoing the demands of the JVP and the FSP.

A socialist program of action

The Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government is now intensifying its class-war attacks. Last week it used draconian Essential Public Service Act (EPSA) measures to ban all strikes and industrial action by electricity and health workers.

Sri Lanka’s capitalist elite and its Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe regime are acutely aware that the next stage of the brutal IMF austerity program cannot be carried out peacefully but that dictatorial measures are required.

Responding to the eruption of mass anti-government struggles, the SEP has deepened its fight to mobilise workers around a series of transitional demands to meet the pressing needs of the masses, resolve the social catastrophe and defeat the government’s dictatorial measures. This includes abolition of the executive presidency and for the repeal of all Sri Lanka’s draconian measures, such as the State of Emergency, EPSA and the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

As the SEP’s April 7 statement explained:

What is to be done? The Sri Lankan capitalist class is completely incapable of addressing any of the pressing social needs of the workers and poor. No amount of pleading or pressure will cause them to change course when their profits and wealth are at stake.

The working class can only fight for its needs if it establishes its own organisations, independent of all factions of the bourgeoisie and the trade unions that have played such a treacherous role in suppressing the wave of mass strikes and protests over the past two years.

The SEP is stepping up its calls for the formation of democratically elected action committees in factories, workplaces, plantations and working-class neighbourhoods throughout the country. These fighting organisations will unleash the industrial and political strength of the working class, rallying the rural poor and all oppressed.

To address the social calamity, the SEP calls for democratic, working-class control over the production and distribution of all essential items and other critical resources. This perspective requires repudiating foreign loans and nationalising the banks, big corporations, plantations, and other major economic nerve centres.

Other essential steps include the indexing of wages to the cost of living

to combat rampant inflation; guaranteed jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions; cancellation of debts of poor and marginal farmers and small business; and reinstatement of subsidies, including for fertilisers.

The fight for this program and the unity of workers across all racial and religious lines is ever more urgent. No to all forms of chauvinism and communalism!

The SEP advances this socialist program as part of the fight for a workers' and peasants' government and in unity with their class brothers and sisters coming into struggle across South Asia and in the US, UK, Europe and other imperialist centres.

There is no solution within the capitalist system and on a national basis to the immense social problems that confront working people the world over—from the pandemic, to imperialist war, and price rises.

Sri Lankan workers and their action committees can unify and coordinate their fight through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees in the struggle against social inequality, war and dictatorship, and for international socialism.

Take up this fight for socialism! Join the SEP to lead this struggle!



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