

Sri Lankan police arrest 21 anti-government protesters

Our correspondents
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Sri Lankan police yesterday morning arrested 21 anti-government protesters, accusing them of blocking the entrances to the Treasury premises located in the Presidential Secretariat building in central Colombo.

Hundreds of heavily-armed police and its special task force officers cordoned off the area around the building, arresting 16 male and five female protesters, and bundling them into buses. They were taken to Peliyagoda police station, about three kilometres away in the Colombo suburbs. Video footage showed police roughly manhandling the agitators.

Those arrested have been involved in the anti-government occupation of Colombo Galle Face Green since early April. The ongoing protest is to demand the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government, and an end to the skyrocketing cost of essentials, including food, medicine and fuel, and to extended power cuts.

The police accused the demonstrators of preventing finance ministry secretaries from attending a meeting with an International Monetary Fund (IMF) team currently in Sri Lanka for 10 days of talks with the government. They were arrested, police said, as the protest was an “unlawful assembly.”

Those arrested were released later in the evening on 500,000-rupee (\$US1,390) sureties, after giving statements to police and being brought before a magistrate. They could be charged with “unlawful assembly” and “obstructing essential duties.” Their cases will come before the courts again on July 22.

Four days ago, on a request of the police, a magistrate in Colombo ordered the arrest of nine people from the Galle Face protest. They are Rathindu Senaratne, Wasantha Mudalige and Lahiru Weerasekera, Jagath Manuwarna, Dhammika Munasinghe, Eranga Gunasekera, Jehan Apphami, and Buddhist monks

Ratkarawwe Jinarathana and Galwewa Siridhamma.

Lahiru Weerasekera is a leader of the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and Wasantha Mudalige is president of the Inter-university Student Federation (IUSF). Eranga Gunasekera is convener of the Socialist Youth Union, which is controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

They were all accused of engaging in “violent” protests on June 9 near Colombo police headquarters and outside education ministry premises. These anti-democratic attacks are part of a broader government crackdown on workers and youth.

Over the past month, Sri Lankan police have taken 1,808 people into custody across the country, accusing them of being involved in violent acts. About 780 of these people have been remanded (see: “Sri Lankan police intensify witch hunt against anti-government activists”).

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality (IYSSE) condemn the police arrests on Monday and the ongoing witch hunt of anti-government protesters.

It must be said, however, that the SEP and the IYSSE do not support in any way the politics of the JVP, FSP, IUSF and other middle-class groups dominating the Galle Face Green protests.

At a press conference yesterday, a spokesman for the demonstrators condemned the arrests, saying that they were unaware that the IMF team was coming to the Treasury for discussions that day.

“No one informed us,” he said. “If we knew that the IMF team was coming, we would go away saluting them. We don’t want the country becoming anarchic.”

A later statement issued by the protesters declared that their action was not aimed against the IMF. The government, which had deliberately delayed going to

the IMF, it added, was now attempting to blame protesters.

These statements show once again that the “Gota Gogama” protesters only want President Rajapakse and his government removed in order to pave the way for another capitalist government that will similarly impose the harsh austerity measures demanded by the IMF. This is the political agenda of the parliamentary opposition parties, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the JVP, as well as the FSP.

The IMF team is in Sri Lanka for discussions with the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe administration under the existing conditions of extreme inflation, severe shortages of essential items, a breakdown of the health system, higher taxes, and preparations for mass public sector job cuts. The purpose of these talks is not to alleviate any of the life and death issues confronting millions of Sri Lankans but to ensure the government imposes even more catastrophic austerity measures.

There is no solution to the immense social problems facing the working class and the poor within the capitalist system. The solution lies in a political fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies.

This program will be discussed at the online meeting “The lessons of the mass uprising in Sri Lanka” organised by the SEP and IYSSE on Sunday, July 3 at 4 p.m. We urge workers and youth to register for and participate in this vital meeting.



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