

Strong interest in SEP meeting on the mass uprising in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
28 June 2022

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are conducting a vigorous campaign for their online public meeting next Sunday, entitled “The lessons of the mass uprising in Sri Lanka.” The event will broadcast via Zoom and be live-streamed on the party’s Facebook page.

Campaigners are distributing printed copies of the SEP statement, “To oppose IMF austerity, Sri Lankan workers must draw the lessons of past two months of popular uprising,” as well as circulating it through social media platforms.

The meeting is being held in an extremely explosive political situation. This week the Colombo government took further measures to shut down government offices and schools and asked private employers to limit calling in workers because of fuel shortages.

The government has told people to restrict their movement and yesterday it increased fuel prices and bus and rail fares. The government has almost no foreign exchange to import essentials, including fuel, food and medicines.

An International Monetary Fund (IMF) team is in Colombo continuing discussions about the further harsh austerity measures the government must impose in order to obtain a bailout loan. Senior US officials are in Sri Lanka too, backing the government’s turn to the IMF and strengthening Washington’s geo-political interests.

Mass protests and strikes involving millions of workers in Sri Lanka are part of an international upsurge of working-class struggles. Trade unions backed by the opposition parties and pseudo-left groups have blocked these struggles from developing in a revolutionary direction.

The SEP/IYSSE meeting has been called to discuss the important lessons of the past two months in order to politically prepare for the coming struggles.

Below are some of the comments made by those who have registered for Sunday’s meeting.

D.M.D.P Jayawardena, a health assistant at Kandy Hospital, explained that due to the shortage of staff they have to work all day and night, adding to the difficulties produced by fuel shortages. “Although I went to a filling station last Friday with the fuel permit for essential health services, I had to return home without having any fuel after waiting for six hours in the queue.”

Despite this dire situation, “the trade unions have maintained a dead silence. As if workers have no problems! They accept what the government says, workers must sacrifice, and that’s the reason for their silence. We have become very helpless since the government has limited our overtime pay. Since I cannot live on this salary, I cultivate a paddy field during my free time.”

He invited other workers to participate in Sunday’s meeting. “In the discussions at the Kandy Health Workers’ Action Committee, I realised that these issues could not be resolved through changes in parliament or through elections. I think a broad group of workers should come to that realisation and actively contribute to the formation of action committees.”

Neranjala, a deputy school principal in Colombo, said: “The government is closing schools arbitrarily due to the fuel crisis. We cannot anymore bear the destruction happening to the education of students. Many of them have no hope for the future. None of them are responsible for this crisis. But why do they have to pay the price for that? This situation cannot be tolerated anymore.

“I read the WSWWS article on how big companies in Sri Lanka have made profits in the midst of this crisis. I felt really angry when I went through the numbers. That is the wealth that can solve the problems of the suffering people. The most important point is that not only the bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka should be responsible for this

situation. It is the wealth accumulation by the capitalists all over the world that has created the inequality on a global level.

“Many people did not have this understanding during the recent struggle that demanded [President] Gotabhaya Rajapakse go home. Without that understanding workers will not be able to decide what program they should fight for in future struggles. There is no way for capitalist profit-making and human needs to co-exist in this period. The capitalist system must be brought to an end in order to protect human interests.

“I have attended SEP meetings before. I believe these crucial issues will be discussed more broadly in this meeting.”

Sarath, a young garment worker in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ), had participated in the April 28 and May 6 general strikes.

“The trade unions in the Katunayake zone did not call protests. We cannot come onto the streets all of a sudden because workers fear the loss of jobs which may affect families. But this time workers came out united.”

The Free Trade Zone and General Services Trade Union had betrayed a 10-day wage strike by garment workers in January, after which workers left the union.

Sarath commented: “I believe we must organise ourselves to take up the struggle to reject all these capitalist politicians so that we can come out of these miserable conditions.”

Campaigners discussed with Sarath the necessity of building action committees, as new organisational forms, in every factory and working-class neighbourhood. The discussion went on to the importance of the fight for the international unity of workers, given that free trade zone workers are directly exploited by multinational corporations.

Sarath replied: “To form such committees is good. We must seek ways to remove these governments. I can organise friends from my factory for such an action committee.”

He warned that factories could close because of the way things were developing in the country. “We see everything—the supply of fuel, foods—has collapsed. I believe forming an alliance with other workers in the country and other countries should be possible.”

Nuwantha, a young worker in the KFTZ, also had joined the general strikes on April 28 and May 6. He said the masses in Sri Lanka were already suffering starvation. “I have to spend my whole salary on our meals. Finally nothing remains. I cannot even buy a vegetable. If we

want to save any money, we have to skip meals.”

Nuwantha condemned the government for deploying the military around the free trade zone after the May 6 general strike. “It is afraid of workers coming into struggle. No matter how hard the government tried to stop workers, the conditions they face forced them to do nothing but fight.

“We voluntarily participated in those strikes without any call by the trade unions. We expected some change to happen but our struggle produced no results.”

Nuwantha wanted to know why, which led to a discussion on the role of the trade unions, the global capitalist crisis, the need for socialist policies and the fact that these issues will be explored at Sunday’s public meeting.

Sanduni Somaratne, a final year drama and theatre student at the University of Kelaniya, commented: “This economic crisis is seriously affecting our future. I am doing an external degree at a government university. The exam fees have increased a lot. Class fees have doubled. I even had to pawn my necklace to pay the fees. Many of my friends continue their education in a similar manner. But with the lack of job opportunities, we all feel uncertain about the future.

“It was encouraging to see workers entering the struggle. I strongly believe that the working class can change this situation. Implementing IMF measures means dragging people from bad to worse.”

The student criticised the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party for deliberately confusing the anti-government protesters by saying that applying more pressure would change the government.

“Repudiation of the foreign debt is a crucial action in resolving the crisis in Sri Lanka. I agree that production and distribution must be taken out of the hands of big business. How can such steps be implemented except by uniting with the international working class? Everyone in the anti-government struggle must recognise the limitations of their own struggle.”



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