

Sri Lankan government declares virtual national lockdown! Fight for a socialist program to end the social calamity

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Just four days after Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe declared the Sri Lankan economy had “completely collapsed,” the government has imposed a virtual lockdown on the country, telling people to stay at home for two weeks to July 10, because Sri Lanka has run out of fuel.

Public offices have been closed except for essential staff, while the private sector has been asked to use the “work from home” method for its employees. Millions of casual day workers and self-employed have been left in the lurch. Schools in major cities have been ordered to close. Public transport has been crippled.

These brutal measures have been thrust upon working people who are already facing immense suffering. According to the UN, 70 percent of the population is skipping at least one meal a day, while many are starving amid spiraling inflation and acute shortages of essentials. Without life-saving medicines, public hospitals are crumbling amid the fuel crisis.

The capitalist class and its government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe have no solution to this immense social crisis. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insists that only the working class can resolve these massive social problems by implementing a socialist program.

At the root of the Sri Lankan economic and social turmoil is the global capitalist crisis, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, and greatly intensified by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

After creating a social catastrophe for the masses, what is the solution now being carried out by the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government? It is a ruthless program of austerity.

Last week Wickremesinghe told parliament: “The only safe option before us now is to hold discussions with the International Monetary Fund. In fact, this is our only option.”

The IMF delegation in Colombo is proposing a massive downsizing of the public sector, the privatisation and commercialisation of state enterprises, and increased taxes.

Already, more than 800,000 public sector jobs have been put on the chopping block. Even though no fuel is available, the government has increased prices for all fuel types yet again. Cabinet has approved a proposal to handover the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation’s distribution centres to multinationals such as Caltex, Shell and Esso. The Indian Oil Company is already

operating its own network. Amid lengthy daily power cuts, the Electricity Board is to increase charges by 87 percent.

Despite knowing that there is no end in sight, Wickremesinghe cynically called on people “to bear these difficulties and hardships for a short period of time and contribute to the nation-building effort.”

What are the solutions of the opposition parties?

Amid mass outrage over the unbearable conditions, the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) announced this week said it will “start street battles from this week to change the government.”

This is to hoodwink people. This capitalist party has been calling on the Rajapakse regime since last year to seek assistance from the IMF, well aware that it would mean huge inroads into living conditions. Its leaders were part of Wickremesinghe’s right-wing United National Party that implemented the IMF’s austerity policies when in power, from 2001 to 2004 and 2015 to 2019.

The other bourgeois party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), this week launched a separate campaign on the theme “Mobilise on the streets! Chase out the government!”

However, JVP leader Anura Kumara Disسانayake is on record as saying there is “no immediate solution to economic crisis” other than to go for loans from international institutions, debt restructuring and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, “except [for] key sectors.” In other words, implementing IMF austerity is their solution too.

Neither the SJB nor the JVP has opposed any of the IMF’s harsh demands implemented by the Rajapakse regime. Both are calling for an interim all-party administration for a short period then elections to form a new government.

Beware these parties! Their aim is to suppress the mass opposition to the government by diverting it into safe parliamentary channels to prop up bourgeois rule.

As the SEP has explained, there is no solution to the economic and social crisis within the capitalist system for the workers and poor, nor is there any national solution. No amount of pressure will change the policies of the government and the ruling class. That has been bitterly demonstrated over the past two months.

Since early April, protests and strikes have erupted in Sri Lanka shaking not only the Rajapakse regime but the entire political establishment. Millions took part in general strikes on April 28 and

May 6, uniting Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, and supported by almost every section of the oppressed.

The masses demanded the ouster of President Rajapakse and his government. They demanded an end to the price increases, the acute shortages of essentials and the extended power cuts.

Trade unions called these strikes reluctantly, to deflect the boiling anger of workers. They immediately diverted these strikes into the call for an interim regime and general elections—the demands of the SJB and JVP—and treacherously betrayed the genuine interests of the working class.

The pseudo-left groups, including the Frontline Socialist Party, which are the hangers-on of the main capitalist parties, backed the trade unions in betraying these struggles.

What is the alternative for workers? How can the working class implement a socialist solution to meet its pressing needs?

The SEP calls on workers to organise a democratically-functioning network of action committees, independent of the trade unions and political establishment, in factories, plantations, workplaces and working-class neighborhoods, so as to mobilise its immense social power against the capitalist onslaught. We will assist in this endeavor and work to link these committees with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The SEP advances the following policies around which the action committees can wage a political struggle. These directly challenge the ruthless austerity program of government and opposition parties by putting human needs before the profits of international finance capital and big business.

* For workers' democratic control of the production and distribution of all essential items and resources critical for the lives of people! Nationalise the banks, big corporations, plantations and other major economic nerve centres!

* Repudiate all foreign debts! No to the austerity demands of the IMF and World Bank that represent the international bankers and financial institutions!

* Seize the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations!

* Cancel all debts of poor and marginal farmers and small business holders! Reinstating all price subsidies, including on fertilisers for farmers!

* Guarantee jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions! Index wages to the cost of living!

A determined struggle by the working class through its action committees for these policies will rally poor farmers and oppressed communities deprived of basic democratic rights to its side. It will lay the basis for the formation of a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies.

It is telling that a government which was so reluctant to lock down the country to protect the population from the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, now tells people to stay at home to save the country from bankruptcy. The capitalist class and its government care nothing about human lives. Their only concern is to protect the profits of big business and international investors.

The SEP warns that the ruling class will stop at nothing to impose the IMF's dictates, including the mobilisation of the army

and police state measures to crush any opposition. We call for an immediate end of the executive presidency, which is a dictatorship-in-waiting, and all the associated anti-democratic legislation and emergency powers.

Workers and youth should seriously consider why the US and India are sending their envoys to Sri Lanka amid this enormous crisis. The claims of Washington and New Delhi to be concerned about the plight of the Sri Lankan people are nonsense. Their real concern is that political instability in Sri Lanka has the potential to trigger revolutionary upheavals more broadly in the region and internationally, amid a profound crisis of global capitalism. They back the IMF's austerity agenda and are seeking to use the crisis to pressure Colombo to completely line up with their confrontation with China.

US President Joe Biden has offered a token \$US20 million more in assistance to Sri Lanka while providing tens of billions in military aid to Ukraine to fight NATO's proxy war against Russia. The G7 meeting and NATO summit in Spain is a war council to extend the conflict with Russia that is also aimed against China and which threatens a global conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

The ally of Sri Lankan working class in its struggle against the conspiracy of international capital backed by the US and India is the international working class which is already fighting against similar attacks on its living conditions.

The class struggle is intensifying not only in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, but also in the major imperialist centres, including the US and Europe.

A short list includes strikes by Ford workers in India, South African mine workers, steel workers in Venezuela, Israeli teachers and bus drivers, British railway workers, dock workers in Germany, Australian nurses and teachers, healthcare workers in Greece, Quebec mine workers in Canada and CNH industrial workers in the US.

The IWA-RFC is the means for unifying these struggles of workers around the world. The Sri Lankan working class needs to establish links with the IWA-RFC to build unity with their class brothers and sisters globally in the common struggle against the onslaught against their basic social and democratic rights.

We urge you to attend the online meeting at 4 p.m. on July 3, organized by the SEP and IYSSE to discuss this program, and to join this essential political struggle.



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