

Workers and youth explain why they are attending Sri Lankan SEP's online public meeting

Our reporters
1 July 2022

The campaign for the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality (IYSSE) online meeting on the political lessons of the popular uprising against the Rajapakse government is winning strong support from workers, youth and farmers.

SEP/IYSSE members have distributed thousands of copies of the SEP's statement "To oppose IMF austerity, Sri Lankan workers must draw the lessons of past two months of popular uprising." The statement is provoking important discussion amid a deepening political crisis of the ruling elite and escalating social attacks by the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government.

This week, the government declared a virtual shut-down of the economy due to fuel shortages, even as millions of workers and the oppressed were struggling to survive with skyrocketing food prices and shortages of essentials. The majority of workers in the public and private sectors have been directed to remain at home.

The Sri Lankan economy, Prime Minister Wickremesinghe told parliament a few days ago, has "collapsed to the bottom." The government already is implementing the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated "economic reforms," with even harsher attacks to come. This includes the privatisation and commercialisation of government enterprises and massive cuts to job, wages and benefits, and social subsidies.

While millions of workers participated in general strikes in April and May, to demand the ousting of President Rajapakse and his government, the struggles were betrayed by the trade unions, which oppose any independent movement of the working class. All the opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance, support the IMF austerity program.

The working class has demonstrated enormous courage and determination but it needs a socialist perspective, a party and organisations independent of these capitalist parties and

the trade unions. Tomorrow's public meeting has been called to discuss these critical issues.

Liyanage, a Colombo Port worker, said that millions of workers faced major attacks on their jobs and wages.

"The chairman of the COPE [parliamentary Committee of Public Enterprises] said recently that our overtime work must be reduced, but the basic salaries of some grades of harbour workers are very low. This means any reduction in overtime work will affect us severely," he explained.

"This will not only hit harbour workers but the whole working class. As the SEP explains, the problems faced by the Sri Lankan working class are a result of the crisis of global capitalism, escalated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia," he added.

Liyanage said the trade unions continuously limit workers, diverting them into pressuring the government, and then betraying their struggles.

"We have had so many experiences regarding that," he added. "Several parts of Colombo Port could only have been privatised because of those betrayals," he said, referring to the South Asia Gateway Terminal, Colombo International Container Terminal and Western Terminal of Colombo Harbor as examples.

Padmasiri, a farmer from Tangalle in southern Sri Lanka, said farmers have been hard hit by the worsening economic crisis.

"There is no diesel for tractors and no fertiliser. This has meant that farmers have been compelled to abandon their cultivations. People's lives have collapsed as everything has been closed, including schools," he explained.

Padmasiri said all the opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, have no solution to burning issues confronting the masses. "I agree that the working class must mobilise politically on a socialist program," he added.

A **post graduate student** at Moratuwa University, on the outskirts of Colombo, said that there was "no future" for

youth. “I intend to go abroad after my studies because it is difficult to find a job here. [Prime Minister] Wickremesinghe asks the people to tighten their belts, which means no jobs for the youth. This is not a solution to the crisis,” he said.

He had participated in the protests at Galle Face Green in Colombo, the main anti-government protest site, but now realised that this was useless.

“The Inter University Students Federation is protesting every day but nothing has been achieved. I agree that the trade unions have abandoned the struggle and are collaborating with the government. As you said, the working class must take the fight into its own hands.

Commenting on the government-ordered closure of schools and universities over the acute fuel crisis, he said, “The economic process has broken down. What is the use of governments like this? The analysis of WWSWS regarding this situation is correct and there is a potential to attract many readers. I will join the meeting and read the WWSWS.”

Roshan, a railway worker from Ratmalana workshop, said he had read the SEP statement and agreed with it.

“I got it [the statement] when I was at the Galle Face Green protest. I was inspired by the unity across ethnicities [at the protests]. I agreed with the ousting of President Rajapakse and the government, but the so-called interim government proposed by this protest and the opposition parties is not the solution to this crisis,” he said.

More loans from the IMF, Roshan continued, “is not a solution to the debt crisis and will worsen the situation further. The real solution, as explained in the SEP statement, is rejecting repayment of foreign debt and the seizure of the wealth and properties of the capitalists.”

A railway station master told SEP campaigners that nothing can be gained by putting pressure on the capitalist government and complained about workforce shortages in the railways, including station masters.

His station, he explained, requires a staff of seven but there are currently only three. “The recent struggle of the station masters was betrayed by the trade unions in collaboration with the government,” he said.

“The program of an international alliance of action committees presented by the SEP is an important step forward. I will take the initiative to form committees among station masters and other railway workers. I’d like to talk about these political developments and will join the SEP’s online public meeting on Sunday,” he said.

Imasha, a law student at the University of Jaffna, said, “The situation is now very bad. My father is a three-wheeler driver and is always stuck in lines for petrol rather than doing his job. Boarding fees [for university students] have now gone up to more than 5,000 rupees [\$US13.89] per

month. The teachers have organised to provide free lunches to all the students and so the cost has been slightly reduced.

“We were really confronted with the question, who would replace Gotabhaya [Rajapakse] but we cannot accept [SJB leader] Sajith Premadasa. I didn’t vote in the previous elections because there was no-one to vote for,” he added.

“The workers really need to break from the trade unions. My sister works in the district secretariat and according to her experience, workers are not allowed to act outside of the trade unions. You’re not allowed to think of anything other than what the unions say. There’s no discussion with workers. The unions call—and call off—strikes as they wish. If workers defy them, they threaten the workers,” he said.

A 28-year-old Jetwing Hotel worker at Sigiriya said he has never seen such a crisis in his industry. “Some 750 bookings for our hotel were canceled this month, and now only two rooms have been booked out of 35 rooms. I can’t think when this crisis will end. Our wages were reduced by about 53,000 rupees [\$US147] last month,” he explained.

The hotel worker said that he had realised from the beginning that the crisis was not confined to Sri Lanka, that people in many countries face shortages of fuel, cooking gas and food, and rising prices.

“But no one talks about this world situation except WWSWS,” he noted.

“The JVP, Frontline Socialist Party and trade unions protest against the government, but they defend this capitalist system. These organisations say everyone must unite without any political differences but there is a difference between bourgeois politics and working-class politics. The workers must organise on an independent political perspective against capitalism, as you say. I agree with that,” he said.



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