

Well-attended SEP online meeting discusses the lessons of Sri Lankan mass uprising

Our correspondents

5 July 2022

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a powerful online public meeting Sunday, July 3 entitled “The lessons of the mass uprising in Sri Lanka”.

About 120 of the more than 250 registrants joined the meeting held via Zoom, and dozens more watched the event on the party’s Facebook page. The speeches were delivered in Sinhala with English subtitles, simultaneously translated into Tamil.

The meeting was attended by participants across Sri Lanka as well as from the United States, Europe, Australia, India, the Middle East and several other countries. Many put their greetings in the chat box. The video of the event has so far been viewed by more than 1,500 people and shared by over 500.

Prior to the meeting, the SEP and IYSSE campaigned widely among workers and youth involved in the protests and strikes to demand the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. They face unbearable living conditions with severe shortages and skyrocketing prices for food, fuel and cooking gas as well as hours-long daily power outages.

SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekara chaired the meeting. He pointed out that the current extraordinary political situation in Sri Lanka was a particularly sharp expression of the immense crisis of global capitalism intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Referring to the ongoing discussions of the Colombo government with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Jayasekara stressed: “The working class will not passively accept these harsh austerity measures. They have come into struggle against the measures already implemented by the Rajapakse government. New austerity measures will intensify class struggle.”

Jayasekara explained that the SEP had actively

intervened in the mass struggles and fought for socialist policies to address the immense social crisis facing working people. From the outset, the party fought to mobilise the working class independently against the government along with all the establishment parties and their agents including the trade unions and the pseudo-left groups.

SEP Political Committee member Prageeth Aravinda placed the crisis in Sri Lanka in its international context. “The global context of the crisis in Sri Lanka is something that has never been mentioned by any other political party, as they attempt to divert the working class into nationalistic channels.”

The speaker explained that the COVID-19 pandemic had intensified the global capitalist crisis. “Amid the pandemic, the governments all around the world provided all the financial relief needed by the big capitalist companies, making the rich ever richer and deepening the inequality in every country,” he said.

Aravinda also detailed how the destruction of the US-instigated war against Russia in Ukraine had increased global inflation and the price of essential goods, worsening the suffering of millions around the globe.

SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardene opened the main report to the meeting, saying: “The most remarkable character of this uprising is the demonstration of the enormous social power by the working class.”

He then posed the question: “Why was such a powerful popular uprising unable to realize the interests of the workers and other oppressed masses? Why was it unable to oust President Rajapakse, end the scarcity of essentials, bring down their prices and stop the power cuts?”

The speaker quoted from the SEP statement entitled, “To oppose IMF austerity, Sri Lankan workers must draw the lessons of the past two months of popular uprising.” It explained that “to defeat the scorched-earth economic agenda of the Sri Lankan ruling class and the IMF, it [the

working class] 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.”

“The trade unions”, the speaker stressed, “in both Sri Lanka and internationally, transformed themselves into the tools of employers and bourgeois political movements long ago”. He gave examples of how the Sri Lankan trade unions were involved in dismantling workers’ struggles and how they operated to enable the government to unleash the IMF’s austerity measures on working people.

Wijesiriwardena explained the parliamentary opposition parties had no fundamental differences with the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government over implementation of the IMF’s demands. “From the outset, the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) has demanded the government turn to the IMF. The leader of the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna, Anura Kumara Disanayake, says there is no ‘immediate solution to the economic crisis’ other than borrowing from international institutions, restructuring debt and privatizing”.

The speaker added that the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), along with other pseudo-left groups, consciously prevents the workers and youth from waging a fight against capitalism by proclaiming that social and democratic rights can be defended by pressurising the government.

Wijesiriwardena explained: “The SEP urged the workers to build their own action committees, that will unleash the industrial and political strength of the working class, rallying the rural poor and all other oppressed.”

He further explained: “The struggles of Sri Lankan workers cannot go ahead without establishing the class unity with the workers in South Asia, the US, the UK, Europe and other imperialist countries.”

Concluding his speech, Wijesiriwardena referred to the 2011 Egyptian revolution. He said that the most important political lesson of this popular uprising was the necessity of building a revolutionary leadership in advance. He called on all those participating in the meeting to join the SEP and build it as the mass revolutionary party needed by the working class.

In the subsequent question and answer session, Wijesiriwardena dealt with a question regarding the difference between the “Jana Bala Sabha” (People’s Power Councils) proposed by pseudo-left FSP and independent action committees proposed by SEP.

He explained the pro-capitalist nature of the People’s

Power Councils in contrast to the action committees, which were independent organs of the workers being prepared to overthrow the capitalist system and take state power into the hands of the working class, like the Soviets led by Bolshevik party in Russian Revolution in 1917.

“People’s Councils are presented as organizations to promote the bankrupt program of building a ‘people’s power’ outside parliament to pressurize the government to change its policies. These organizations are traps set to undermine the class independence of the working class by blurring class lines.”

Another participant asked how a government can be established without a democratic framework.

Answering that question, SEP general secretary Jayasekara pointed out that a government where the working class holds power has the greatest democratic participation. It is for the benefit of the vast majority of the society, having overthrown the existing capitalist system which is for the profit of a few capitalists.

“Such a democracy can be only established under a government of workers and peasants proposed by the SEP. The action committees we urge to be established to fight for that goal are elected by the workers’ democratic vote,” he said.

Another question was the party’s attitude towards non-governmental organizations and civil organizations.

Jayasekara said that the SEP’s attitude to any organization was based on an examination of its program and class orientation. He said that these organizations may expose the atrocities carried out by bourgeois governments and their military forces, as in the case of the war carried out by successive Colombo governments against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But they keep the working class and oppressed masses trapped politically within the framework of capitalist rule.

He said that the SEP had a principled position of defending such organizations against state repression but it did not support their politics that maintains the capitalist profit system by advocating putting pressure on capitalist governments.



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