The July 9 protest in Sri Lanka: A socialist program for workers and youth

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The popular uprising of workers, youth and rural toilers in Sri Lanka against the Rajapakse government over unbearable conditions—including scarcity, daily power outages, and skyrocketing prices for essentials goods—is now reaching a new stage.

The high price of food items is leading to conditions of mass starvation. The Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government has placed the country on a virtual lockdown because fuel has run out. Schools have been closed, and public sector institutions have been instructed to call only "essential staff" for work. The lack of fuel has led to the collapse of public transport. These conditions have brought popular anger against the government to a boiling point.

Under these conditions, the social media activists who are leading the protest at Galle Face Green in Colombo, also known as "Gota Gogama," have announced a "massive people's protest" for July 9, claiming that it will be the "greatest uprising in the history of Sri Lanka." This date will mark three months since the protest started at Galle Face Green.

However, the "Action Plan for the Future of Struggle," issued by protest leaders on July 5, does not provide any program to address the burning issues confronting the masses. Rather, it would trap workers, youth and rural toilers within bourgeois rule and capitalist profit system, which is the root cause of the crisis.

Their program calls for an "interim government", i.e., an alternative bourgeois government, which has been promoted by opposition parties in parliament, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), supported by pseudo-left groups like Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). A leading organiser of protests, Anuruddha Bandara, told *Economynext* that the opposition parties—the SJB, JVP and others—are "almost onboard."

The main tenets of the Action Plan include the demand for resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the Cabinet of Ministers and all the government appointees to high posts. Their alternative is an "Interim Governance" but with no indication as to who will make up this regime. It is implied, however, that all the parliamentary political parties are to be included in this interim government, as proposed by the opposition parties themselves.

This "Interim Governance" is supposed to subscribe to "the economic, social and political aims and aspirations of the people's struggle." While they have included securing the supply of essentials, like fuel and food, in their long list of "aims and aspirations," they have not advanced any concrete program on how to provide them. They just hope that the "Interim Governance" will provide them if pressured to do so.

A "Peoples Council" is also proposed, in which representatives of the "Peoples Struggle," will be able to "effectively engage and mediate with the Interim Governance." That is, the task of the "Peoples Council" will be to exert pressure on new government. This is the same program advocated by pseudo-left FSP. The Action Plan proposes within a year to establish a new constitution through a referendum, which would "abolish the executive presidency" and create "an appropriate process for a fair election."

In opposition to the program of the Galle Face protest leaders for formation of an alternative bourgeois government, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) advocates a revolutionary socialist program for the working class. We call for the independent mobilisation of the working class on a clear program of action to fulfill their basic needs against the Rajapakse government and bourgeois rule.

The SEP insists that there will no solution to the burning issues confronting the masses within bourgeois rule and the capitalist profit system. There is no national solution. No amount of pressure exerted on this government or any future bourgeois government will make the ruling class provide the basic needs of the masses.

While supporting the main demand of the struggling masses for the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government, the SEP insists that it should not be replaced with another bourgeois government, but with a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies.

As explained in our statement issued on April 7, at the very beginning of mass uprising and also reiterated in subsequent statements, the SEP calls for the immediate abolition of the executive autocratic presidency along with repressive laws such as the Essential Services Act, the Public Security Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, which give police state powers to

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the security forces. Over the past month, Rajapakse invoked essential service laws against electricity and health workers. He used his emergency powers to deploy the military to the streets to repress workers languishing in queues for days to obtain fuel.

Irrespective of the bourgeois government that may replace the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe regime, it will continue the same harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). It will seek to force working people and rural toilers to bear the full burden of the economic crisis.

All the opposition parties, including the SJB, JVP and Tamil National Alliance, have expressed their open or tacit support for IMF policies. Therefore, the so-called interim governance proposed in the Action Plan will become an instrument of the capitalist ruling elite to brutally implement those policies and crush all opposition from the working class and rural toilers.

The brutality of the IMF program was indicated in Prime Minister Wickremesinghe's speech to parliament on Tuesday. Referring to the coming period, which will be stamped by IMF dictates, he said: "This will be a difficult and bitter journey… if things do not change, the whole country will collapse."

The "changes" include massively downsizing the public sector, privatising state-owned enterprises, and broadening the tax base with increased taxes. They will lead to cuts in jobs, wages, and other benefits of workers in public sector, increases in water and electricity prices, and a further slashing of subsidies.

The working class must reject this brutal class-war policy and all interim government traps. Workers must develop their own independent political intervention based on a program that addresses their needs and unleashes immense social power, which was demonstrated during general strikes on April 28, May 6 and May 10. This program must be based on the social needs of workers and the rural toilers, not the profit demands of big business.

The first step in fighting for this program is to form democratically-elected independent action committees of the working class in factories, workplaces, plantations and working-class neighborhoods throughout the country. The action committees must be independent of the capitalist parties and the trade unions, which act as stooges and apologists of the capitalist ruling establishment.

The SEP encourages and will assist workers in forming these action committees, which will advance a working-class solution to the socio-economic crisis created by the capitalist class. The struggle of the working class must be internationally integrated through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The SEP advances the following demands as the fighting program for the Action Committees to overcome the mass suffering created by capitalism:

* For workers' democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential items and other 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!

* Establish a state monopoly of foreign trade to eradicate corruption in export and import processes and also ensure the supply of all essentials!

* Seize the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations!

* Cancel all debts of poor and marginal farmers and small business holders! Reinstate all subsidies, including fertiliser subsidies for farmers!

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

An independent movement of the working class organised through action committees based on the above demands will rally the rural poor and other oppressed masses. It will create the foundation for a mass movement aimed at establishing a government of workers and peasants, committed to socialist policies.

The fight for this program is part of a broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally, which must be waged through a united movement of the working class globally.

The potential for such an independent movement of the working class has been clearly demonstrated in the powerful intervention of the working class in popular uprising in Sri Lanka. This includes the massive general strikes on April 28, May 6 and May 10, in which millions participated.

The struggle of workers in Sri Lanka is part of an upsurge of the working class throughout the world. The international airline industry has been affected by strikes in recent weeks, following the strike of 50,000 British rail workers struck. From Latin America to Asia, and from Europe to the United States, educators, auto workers, transportation workers, health care workers and all sections of the working class are entering into struggle against soaring prices, exploitation and inequality.

We urge workers and youth to join the SEP to and take up this struggle for a socialist program and perspective.

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