Sri Lankan protesters occupy official residences of president and prime minister

Our reporters
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On Saturday, hundreds of thousands of workers, youth and rural toilers from all over Sri Lanka converged on Colombo to mark the third month of popular protests demanding the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. They stormed the presidential secretariat and the official residences of the president and the prime minister in Colombo and are currently occupying them.

Along with demonstrations in major cities across the country, the July 9 anti-government protests are the largest against the ruling elite in the country's history.

In a desperate attempt to restrict the protests, the government deployed hundreds of military personnel and police to establish roadblocks on every road entering the Colombo city limits. However, protesters overturned the blockades and marched to the main protest site on Galle Face Green outside the presidential secretariat.

Riot squad officers fired bullets into the air and rounds of tear gas, and used water cannon to try to disperse the protesters. But they rapidly gathered in huge numbers, chanting "Go home Gota" and other anti-government slogans.

Overwhelmed by the massive protest, police and the military withdrew, leaving behind water cannon trucks and buses. Meanwhile, workers from the nearby National Hospital marched to the presidential secretariat and joined the demonstration.

In defiance of the armed forces, who had opened fire, the protesters stormed the presidential buildings. According to Colombo's main hospital, three people were admitted with gunshot wounds, along with 36 others suffering breathing difficulties from the barrages of tear gas.

President Rajapakse and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe were not in their respective residences when the buildings were taken over. With security forces hopelessly outnumbered, protesters freely roamed through the buildings, climbed onto the rooftops and took photographs, while chanting slogans.

The slogans included, "Whose power is this? It is the people's power" after it was announced that Rajapakse was ready to resign. Prime Minister Wickremesinghe later said he would resign and several government ministers have already quit their positions.

In an attempt to prevent people travelling to Colombo on Saturday, the government illegally imposed a police curfew from 9 p.m. on Friday night until further notice, covering most police divisions in Colombo city and its outskirts.

The police declared that all residents should remain indoors during the curfew. Any defiance of the curfew would be considered a violation of public peace and law and strictly punished, they declared, and all travel through the areas under curfew was completely prohibited.

Thousands of workers, youth, housewives and even children defied the curfew and began marching towards central Colombo during the night. People across the country voiced their anger on social media and declared that they would come to Colombo.

In the face of this mass opposition, the Sri Lanka Bar Association (BASL) and several human rights organisations challenged the legality of the curfew and urged the government to reverse its decision. Confronted with this opposition, the government lifted the curfew at 8 a.m. on Saturday.

Even though transportation was hampered by severe fuel shortages, people from across the country hired buses, transport lorries and trucks to travel to the capital. Others wanting to get to Colombo in towns along the way were picked up, the transport provided

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free of charge.

Train travel to Colombo remained uncertain with railway management citing the curfew. But after thousands gathered at stations in the major cities on Saturday morning, railway workers ensured that all the major lines operated to take passengers to the capital.

Train passengers travelled to Colombo chanting anti-government slogans and displaying placards. Others gathered at railway stations on the way cheered the protesters on trains packed to capacity.

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka has been the only organisation that has advanced an independent political perspective for the working class when the mass anti-government protests began three months ago. Its international socialist program rejects all Sri Lankan capitalist parties and their pseudo-left and trade union agents.

SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) campaigners intervened in Saturday's protests, distributing thousands of copies of its statement, "The July 9 protest in Sri Lanka: A socialist program for workers and youth."

SEP and IYSSE members and supporters staged a rally, holding placards, chanting slogans and speaking with those marching on the road towards the presidential secretariat. Slogans included "Bring down the Rajapakse government; Abolish the executive presidency along with repressive anti-working-class laws; Build Workers Action Committees; No to hunger and austerity; Ensure food, fuel and medicines for all; Repudiate all the foreign debts."

Addressing the rally, SEP Political Committee member Prageeth Aravinda said, "While fully 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."

Workers should not support any interim government, he explained, but take this struggle into their hands by breaking from the trade unions and forming independent action committees and combine on a united program with their class brothers and sisters around the world who are entering into struggle against similar attacks. "The SEP will provide all the necessary political support for this struggle," he said.

Thilina, a young worker, told the WSWS: "Yes, all our problems will not be solved after Gotabhaya Rajapakse is ousted. I agree with the fact that any interim government will implement the same capitalist policies. Until now, my attention was not focused on the fact that changing class rule is the solution. It is something that needs to be seriously considered."

Nishantha, who works in a private bank, said: "I originally thought that people should also make sacrifices to get out of this situation. But when I think about the fact that the government has not taken these foreign loans for us, I wonder why people need to bear the burden of this economic crisis. The measures the IMF are proposing are to take from the working people, not from the rich. This discussion has helped me understand that every decision made within this system is to ensure the profits of the few. We should look at every issue from that angle."

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