

Sri Lankan uprising forces resignation of president and prime minister

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Massive popular protests in Colombo on Saturday in which about a million workers, youth and rural poor participated have forced President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to announce that he will step down next Wednesday. Having initially refused to do so, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe late Saturday also declared that he would resign, following formation of an “all-party government.”

The Saturday demonstrations for which people traveled to Colombo from areas all around the country marked three months since the beginning of protests at Galle Face Green in Colombo demanding the resignation of President Rajapakse and his government. In doing so, those that joined the mass protests on Saturday defied a curfew and police attacks.

The huge protest marks a turning point in the economic, political and social crisis in Sri Lanka, which is itself an acute expression of the global crisis of capitalism that has intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic and been exacerbated by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

The forced resignation of Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe demonstrates the immense social power of the working class, which has played a central role in the now three-month-old popular uprising against the government. However, their replacement by an all-party government will resolve none of the crucial issues confronting workers, youths and rural toilers. It will do nothing to end the unbearable living conditions produced by severe shortages and skyrocketing prices of essentials, including fuel, food, medicines and cooking gas, or the hours-long daily power outages.

Although Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe may go, political and economic power will remain in the hands of the bourgeoisie. As long as bourgeois rule continues, the social crisis confronting working people and rural toilers will only worsen. The opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—which are busy negotiating behind closed doors to form an “interim government,” are committed to implementing the severe austerity measures

demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

When the popular protests began, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) issued a statement on April 7 raising the essential political issues for the working class: “The Socialist Equality Party stands squarely behind the demands of working people: ‘Gota has got to go!’ But what is to replace him? It is not enough to demand Rajapakse’s removal. He is only the present-day ugly face of a corrupt and reactionary presidential state system that is organised to secure the wealth and interests of the capitalist class and perpetuate the exploitation and impoverishment of the workers and peasants throughout the island.”

In explaining what had to be done, the SEP stated: “As a key step in addressing the current political crisis, the SEP demands the immediate abolition of the executive presidency, which, with its sweeping autocratic powers, holds a gun to the heads of the working class... The SEP insists that the purpose of these necessary democratic political changes, which can be achieved only through determined struggle by the working class, the rural poor and youth, is to set into motion a fundamental restructuring of the economy along socialist lines.”

The class interests of workers and the rural masses are directly opposed to the IMF austerity agenda that will be ruthlessly implemented by any interim government. In a statement issued on Sunday, the IMF declared: “We hope for a resolution of the current situation that will allow for resumption of our dialogue on an IMF-supported program.”

In addition to the tough measures already imposed, the IMF is demanding increased taxes and the widening of the tax net, the wholesale slashing of public expenditure that will impact heavily on essential services such as education, health and price subsidies, and further privatisations that will inevitably mean savage cuts to jobs, wages and conditions in the public sector.

US imperialism is nervously following events in Sri Lanka, acutely aware that the popular uprising on the island could trigger similar protests in other parts of the globe, particularly in India, where working people face a similar

social crisis. At the same time, it will seek to exploit the crisis to advance its position in Colombo as part of its broader efforts to prepare for war against China.

On the eve of Saturday protests, US Ambassador in Colombo Julie Chung appealed for calm, tweeting: “Violence is not an answer. If you are going to protest, please do so peacefully. And reminding military & police to grant peaceful protesters the space and security to do so. Chaos and force will not fix the economy or bring the political stability that Sri Lankans need right now.”

However, the IMF’s austerity measures will only intensify the opposition of workers and rural toilers, and cannot be imposed democratically. The resignation of Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe and the formation of an all-party interim government is a desperate attempt by the ruling class to buy time. Such a government will attempt to wear down, divide and demoralise the opposition, paving the way for military-police repression and dictatorial forms of rule.

In ominous public comments on Saturday evening, Chief of Defence Staff and former Army Commander General Shavendra Silva told a special media briefing: “The people must provide necessary support for the armed forces and the police to maintain peace in the country.”

Sri Lankan workers need to draw a sharp warning from the experiences of the Egyptian revolution in 2011 when the decades-long dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak was ousted by the popular uprising of working people. However, the independent revolutionary intervention by the working class was blocked through the role of the pseudo-lefts such as the Revolutionary Socialists (RS), which politically subordinated the opposition to the bourgeois Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood government was incapable of resolving the underlying economic and social crisis. As its support waned, and in the absence of a socialist alternative, the military seized the initiative, carried out a brutal crackdown and installed the current military dictatorship of Mubarak’s former general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. As in Sri Lanka, the US was closely involved with all these reactionary manoeuvres to stabilise bourgeois rule.

Sri Lankan workers should place no confidence whatsoever in a new all-party government, whatever its form. They should also reject the efforts of various pseudo-left organisations, such as the Frontline Socialist Party, to promote the illusion that such a government can be pressured to ameliorate the appalling social conditions facing working people.

The alternative for the working class is to fight for its own revolutionary socialist program, rallying youth and the rural poor to bring a government of workers and peasants to power, as a part of broader struggle for socialism in South

Asia and internationally.

The SEP is the only party in Sri Lanka advocating such a perspective. In line with that, the SEP flatly rejected an invitation from the SJB to participate in talks for an “all-party agreement” to form an interim government.

In an open letter to the SJB leader Sajith Premadasa, the SEP warned that like the Rajapakse-Wickremesinghe government, “any capitalist government that will replace it will implement the austerity agenda of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)” and “will use all the existing repressive tools of the state machine to suppress the workers, youth and other toilers who will join the struggles against those attacks.”

The SEP added: “In rejecting your invitation we are advancing a program of action for the working class to mobilise its social power and implement its own solution to the immense social and economic crisis—one that puts human needs before investors’ profit, in opposition to the austerity program of the government and opposition parties like the SJB alike.”

The SEP has called on workers and the rural toilers to form their own action committees, independent of all establishment parties and the trade unions that have played a treacherous role in betraying and blocking strikes and protests. We have outlined a series of demands around which action committees can wage a political struggle, including the repudiation of all foreign debt, for workers’ democratic control of production and distribution, seizure of the wealth of billionaires and corporations, the cancellation of the debts of poor farmers and small business holders, and the reinstatement of price subsidies for food, fuel, and fertilisers.

We urge workers and youth looking for a political alternative to the rotten manoeuvring of capitalist politicians and their pseudo-left hangers-on to join our party and build it as the revolutionary leadership necessary for the struggles ahead.



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