

For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses in Sri Lanka!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
20 July 2022

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, calls for an island-wide campaign by working people and youth for the organisation and convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses.

The SEP envisages this Congress of the exploited laboring masses as a revolutionary political alternative to the reactionary capitalist interim government being set up by the discredited parliamentary cronies of Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Ranil Wickremesinghe—his successor as executive president and would-be autocrat. The new government of the ruling class has only one purpose: to impose the brutal austerity program demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), US and European imperialism and the Sri Lankan ruling class, while strangling popular opposition.

The foundations for the Democratic and Socialist Congress need to be laid by the workers and rural toilers themselves through the establishment of action committees in workplaces, factories, plantations, neighborhoods and rural areas throughout the island to fight for their class interests. If these committees are to give genuine voice to the aspirations of working people, it is essential that they be independent of all the parties of the capitalist class and its trade union flunkys.

The SEP is the only party that has refused to participate in the establishment of an all-party interim government. We have warned that a capitalist interim government will be an instrument for the ruling class to buy time while it prepares a devastating onslaught on the social and democratic rights of the working class. For the capitalist class, the only way out of the economic crisis is a scorched earth policy that destroys what remains of the social gains won by workers in decades of struggle—jobs, working conditions, public education, health care, and price subsidies.

Parliament's selection as president, Wickremesinghe, the notorious enforcer of IMF austerity and US imperialist stooge, provides irrefutable proof that the political system is corrupt, anti-democratic and totally controlled by US imperialism, the IMF, and their agents in the Sri Lankan ruling class.

It also must be taken as a warning. Wickremesinghe, the sole MP of the discredited and hated UNP, staked his claim to the presidency as the representative not of the people, but of capitalist "order." In the six days that he served as "acting president," Wickremesinghe served notice that he is preparing to use all the authoritarian powers of the executive presidency and the full force of the massive military-state apparatus to savagely repress popular opposition and strike a deadly blow against the working class.

Doubling as president and prime minister, he invoked emergency powers to give state authorities the ability to illegalise all protests, impose censorship and detain people en masse without charge. He ordered the police and military to restore order and slandered as "fascists" the masses who had driven the criminal and ruling class thug Gotabhaya Rajapakse

from power.

In refusing to take part in the talks on forming an interim government, the SEP drew on the bitter political lessons of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's catastrophic 1964 betrayal of the essential political principles of Trotskyism. In the midst of an economic and political crisis, and confronting the powerful "21 demands" movement of the working class, Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike, the leader of the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party, turned to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) leaders to prop up capitalist rule. The entry of the LSSP into the bourgeois "Sinhalese First" government of Bandaranaike not only marked the end of the "21 demands" movement. It demoralised the masses, promoted ethno-linguistic strife over class struggle, and paved the way for the domination of reactionary communal politics and decades of civil war.

The SEP has not and never will go down the LSSP's road of betrayal. We reject all forms of direct and indirect support to capitalist governments. The predecessor of the SEP, the Revolutionary Communist League, was founded in 1968 as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in direct opposition to the LSSP's repudiation of socialist internationalism and independent class politics—the pillars of the struggle for workers' power.

The crisis of capitalism in Sri Lanka and globally is far deeper today than sixty years ago. The mass popular uprising of the past three months has shaken bourgeois rule to its very core. But as Leon Trotsky once explained, the strength of the bourgeoisie is that it understands its weakness. If political power is left in its hands, it will ruthlessly defend its interests by imposing the IMF's austerity agenda and crushing any popular opposition.

Trotsky also explained that the weakness of the working class is that it does not understand its strength. The mass popular protests have displayed great militancy, determination and courage. But if working people remain shackled to the political establishment and place their faith in a capitalist interim government, the outcome will inevitably be a disaster.

The lessons of the failed 2011 Egyptian Revolution are of pivotal importance for the Sri Lankan working class at this critical juncture. At the beginning of 2011 a mighty popular upsurge erupted and within a matter of weeks ousted the decades-long military dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. However, because the working class was not armed with an independent class perspective, the mass movement remained dominated by the bourgeois opposition and various sections of the affluent middle class—that is, forces bitterly opposed to any challenge to capitalist rule. This included pseudo-left groups like the Revolutionary Socialists who, in the name of "opening democratic space," urged support for the short-lived, right-wing capitalist government formed by the Muslim Brotherhood, then the so-called "liberal" sections of the military.

As the mass movement in Egypt waned and fragmented, the military backed by US imperialism seized the opportunity for a bloody crackdown and instituted a reign of terror under the current dictator, Mubarak's former general, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

What is the essential lesson of this tragic defeat for the working class? It cannot allow the political initiative to slip from its hands. It needs to tear itself away from all of the political parties of the bourgeoisie, their pseudo-left hangers-on and trade union apparatuses. It must establish its own political instruments to defend its class interests and fight for power. In rejecting talks for an interim government, the SEP understood that the working class has to establish its own political power centre completely independent of the anti-democratic conspiracies of the political establishment and the capitalist state. That is the significance of our call for the Democratic and Socialist Congress of workers and rural masses.

The deep-seated distrust and hostility of broad masses to the entire parliamentary framework was already expressed in the popular slogan “Down with the 225”—in other words, out with not just Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe, but all 225 corrupt, self-seeking politicians occupying their comfortable parliamentary seats. Working people, however, cannot just criticise from the sidelines, they must have their own independent bases of political power to make their voices heard and their actions felt.

Drawing on the immense political experience of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Leon Trotsky had a profound understanding of revolutionary dynamics. His writings on the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s have an extraordinary relevance to events in Sri Lanka. Trotsky wrote:

In reality, in spite of the mighty sweep of the struggle, the subjective factors of the revolution—the party, the organization of the masses, slogans—are extraordinarily behind the tasks of the movement—and it is this backwardness that constitutes the main danger today.

The semi-spontaneous spread of strikes, which have brought victims and defeats or have ended with nothing, is an absolutely unavoidable stage of the revolution, the period of the awakening of the masses, their mobilization and their entry into struggle. For it is not the cream of the workers who take part in the movement, but the masses as a whole. Not only do factory workers strike, but also artisans, chauffeurs and bakers, construction, irrigation and finally agricultural workers. The veterans mould the limbs, the new recruits learn. Through the medium of these strikes, the class begins to feel itself as a class.

However, the spontaneity—which at the present stage constitutes the strength of the movement—may in the future become the source of its weakness. To assume that the movement also in the future will be left to itself without a clear program, without its own leadership, would mean to assume a perspective of hopelessness. For the question involved is nothing less than the seizure of power. Even the most stormy strikes—all the more so the scattered ones—do not solve this problem. If the proletariat were not to feel in the process of the struggle of the coming months that its tasks and methods are becoming clearer to itself, that its ranks are becoming consolidated and strengthened, then a decomposition would set in within its own ranks... Of course, we are far from that point yet. But no time should be lost. [“The revolution in Spain,” January 24, 1931, in *The Spanish Revolution (1931–39)*, Pathfinder Press, pp. 88–89]

That is why the SEP has initiated the process of establishing independent, democratically-elected action committees in the plantations and among teachers and health workers, based on a socialist perspective. But these action committees need to be extended throughout the island, to link up and become the basis for electing delegates to a congress of workers and rural toilers to discuss and adopt a socialist perspective.

The action committees advocated by the SEP are the complete opposite

of the “people’s councils” proposed by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) to pressure an interim government for concessions. It is pointless to go with a begging bowl to any capitalist government. The ruling class has nothing to give but more pain and suffering. What is needed are action committees as fighting bodies for the social and democratic rights of working people.

The SEP has outlined a series of policies around which workers and rural toilers can fight: Reject the IMF austerity agenda! Repudiate all foreign debts! Seize the assets of the super-rich and nationalise the major banks and corporations under workers’ control! The working class must re-organise production and distribution to put an end to the hunger and starvation facing millions and ensure hospitals have medical equipment and medicines. To address the plight of poor farmers, their debts must be cancelled and fertiliser subsidies reintroduced. Jobs must be available to all and wages indexed to the cost of living.

The tasks confronting the SEP’s proposed congress are both democratic and socialist. The capitalist parties conspiring to establish an interim government all declare that the country’s anti-democratic constitution has to be defended. In other words, they insist that the capitalist state, the police, the courts, the prisons and, above all, the executive presidency and its sweeping powers must remain intact. The SEP insists that the executive presidency must be immediately abolished and along with it the whole battery of repressive laws developed over decades.

As Leon Trotsky explained in the Theory of Permanent Revolution, in countries of belated development such as Sri Lanka, democratic tasks are indissolubly linked to the fight for socialism by the working class. In the seven decades since formal independence in 1948, the capitalist class and its political parties have repeatedly trampled on the democratic rights of workers and the rural masses, including in the bloody massacres of Sinhala rural youth in 1970 and 1989–90, and in the reactionary communal war of 1983–2009. Today, in defence of its wealth and the investments of global capital, they are preparing even greater crimes.

Only the working class, rallying the masses behind it in struggle against the entire social and political order, can secure democratic rights, put an end to entrenched discrimination against Tamils and other ethnic minorities, and resolve the pressing issues confronting poor farmers and rural workers, including the lack of land, the staggering cost of fertiliser and other critical supplies, and relentless pressure exerted by large agricultural concerns on small producers.

The SEP has always championed the democratic rights of Tamil workers and peasants and opposes the poisonous Sinhala chauvinism that has been used for decades to divide workers. At the same time, we oppose the divisive Tamil nationalism of the Tamil ruling elites who want nothing more than the “right” to exploit “their” workers, and who, in times of crisis like the present, invariably line up against the working class. We warn that in the coming weeks and months a desperate ruling class will again resort to vile communal lies and provocations to pit workers against each other. They must be opposed.

The SEP’s call for Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses provides a political strategy for the working class to consolidate its forces, win the active support of the rural masses and lay the basis for its own rule through a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to restructuring society on socialist lines. The faster the workers and rural masses take up the political fight to build action committees, the sooner a congress of workers and rural toilers can be convened to oppose the disaster being prepared by the ruling classes. We offer every political assistance to those who want to take up this fight.

Leon Trotsky’s insights resonate today. The workers’ state that took shape after the overthrow of the bourgeois provisional government in Russia in 1917 was based on Soviets—the name given to the independent, democratically-elected councils of workers and poor peasants that emerged in the course of the revolution. Addressing Spanish workers in

1930, Trotsky underscored the importance of fighting for the establishment of Soviets as the necessary lever in the fight for a political power:

It seems to me that the slogan of Soviets is suggested by the whole situation, if we take the Soviets in the form in which they appeared and developed with us: at first, they were powerful strike committees. Not one of the early participants imagined that these were the future organs of power... It is understood that Soviets cannot be created artificially. But during each local strike, embracing a majority of trades and assuming a political character, it is necessary to call the Soviets into existence. This is the only form of organization that is capable, under the given conditions, of taking into its hands the leadership of the movement and of bringing into it the discipline of revolutionary action. ["The Spanish Revolution in Danger," Ibid., p. 67]

That, in essence, is the political task before the working class today and for which the SEP alone fights.

The allies of the Sri Lankan working class in this political struggle are the workers and the oppressed around the world. If they fight for it, workers in Sri Lanka will find an inexhaustible well of support from the international working class. All over the world, the masses are coming to realise that global capitalism, mired in systemic crisis, has nothing to offer them except war, an unending pandemic, fascism, and ever intensifying exploitation and social misery.

Ruling elites the world over are haunted by the spectre of a Sri Lankan-type social explosion, beginning in Pakistan, Egypt and the more than one dozen other countries now targeted for IMF austerity and restructuring, but including the United States and its imperialist allies. As the *Financial Times* warned on February 15:

But Sri Lanka's economic and political woes are far more than a national problem—they are a dramatic example of the potential difficulties looming in a number of other emerging markets. If the string of economic shocks that have battered the global economy are hard enough to manage in rich countries, there is even more cause for worry in many of the poorer and emerging economies that are home to the majority of the world's population. Economic pressures bring political instability—and today economic pressures are everywhere.

The organisation and convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress requires the development of a genuine mass movement embracing the widest sections of the working class and the rural masses. The authority and power of the congress, once it is convened, will depend upon the extent to which it has established a vast network of local committees in workplaces, factories, plantations and neighborhoods in all parts of the country.

In the fight to establish and expand this network of committees, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, will play a critical role. All over the world, there is a growing movement of workers starting to organise themselves independently and break free from the shackles imposed by the pro-corporate and nationalist trade union apparatus.

The Socialist Equality Party is prepared and determined to assist and provide the political direction necessary for the development of the mass movement for the establishment of the Congress.

We issue a special appeal to workers in India and throughout South Asia, as well as internationally, for a joint struggle for a socialist future for humanity. We call on militant workers and youth in Sri Lanka to join the SEP and take your place in the revolutionary struggle for socialist internationalism.



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