SEP condemns state attack on Galle Face protesters in Sri Lanka

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the brutal police-military attack on the unarmed anti-government protesters in Galle Face Green in Colombo in the early hours of Friday. Galle Face Green has been occupied by anti-government protesters demanding the resignation of Gotabhaya Rajapakse as president, and now his successor Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Wickremesinghe clearly instigated the crackdown, which came less than 24 hours after he had been sworn in as executive president. In his short time as acting president, he had declared a state of emergency, given the security forces free rein, and branded anti-government protesters as "fascists." He issued a decree on Thursday ordering the military to maintain "public order" throughout the island.

The operation was well-planned. It was launched at around 1:30 a.m. Friday to catch protesters unawares and avoid public attention. All roads to Galle Face Green were barricaded. Around 1,000 police and soldiers, their faces covered, descended on the protest site from all directions, physically attacked protesters and journalists and tore down their tents and makeshift structures. Fourteen people were admitted to the National Hospital and nine were taken into custody and later bailed.

Wickremesinghe authorised the brutal attack despite the fact that protest organisers had already announced that they would vacate the Presidential Secretariat near Galle Face Green by 2 p.m. on Friday. It was clearly aimed not only at clearing Galle Face Green, but at sending a menacing message to the millions who have joined protests and strikes over the past three months.

The SEP warns working people that the Wickremesinghe government is preparing to ruthlessly implement the savage austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and is acutely conscious that its actions will provoke even greater popular opposition from working people who are already confronting desperate shortages and skyrocketing prices. The ruling class has only one answer—mass repression—and has installed Wickremesinghe to carry it out.

The attack exposes the real face of "parliamentary democracy" as just a façade for the dictatorship of the capitalist class. Wickremesinghe's claim to be defending the constitution and "democracy" is nothing but the defence of bourgeois rule. The constitution gives Wickremesinghe the sweeping powers of a dictator—to unilaterally install and dismiss governments, rule by decree, declare emergencies and order the use of lethal force by the military and police against working people.

All the parties and politicians of the ruling class—including the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the pseudo-left hangers-on of the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), so-called civil society organisations, trade unions and Galle Face Green protest leaders—proclaim the sanctity of the constitution and parliament. All of them promoted the illusion that Wednesday's vote in parliament for a new president offered hope to the masses.

The SEP alone denounced Wednesday's charade in parliament as "a fraud and a conspiracy against the working class, youth and rural poor." Wickremesinghe is being backed to the hilt by big business, US imperialism, the IMF and international investors to heap the burden of the economic crisis onto working people and to suppress any opposition.

Wickremesinghe has a long record as a ruthless defender of capitalist rule. He was a minister in United National Party governments in the 1980s that broke a general strike against pro-market policies, sacked tens of thousands of workers, and, in 1983, orchestrated the notorious anti-Tamil pogroms that initiated the island's devastating communal war. He was publicly accused of

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overseeing the Batalanda torture/killing chambers during the UNP government's bloody crackdown on unrest among rural youth in 1988-90, during which 60,000 were slaughtered by military-organised death squads.

Clearly concerned that Friday's police-state operation will trigger widespread protests, US ambassador in Colombo Julie Chung tweeted her "deep concerns" over the violent attack on protesters and urged "restraint by authorities and immediate access to medical attention for those injured." What hypocrisy! The US only raises "human rights" to further its own predatory interests, and it will issue nothing more than perfunctory expressions of concern to future abuses by the Wickremesinghe government.

The trade unions and opposition parties have paved the way for Wickremesinghe to be installed and are promoting the fatal illusion that his government can be pressured to grant concessions. By blocking the development of an independent movement of working people, they are giving Wickremesinghe a free hand to order the security forces to crack down on any opposition.

Ravi Kumudesh, co-convener of the Trade Union Coordination Centre (TUCC), a major union front, wrote an open letter to Wickremesinghe pleading with him to give his "honest support" for meeting the expectations of the anti-government protests, at least until the next elections.

On Thursday, the "National Movement of Non-party Agitators," a group involved in the anti-government protest movement, held a media conference in front of the prime minister's official residence after dismantling their protest. They said they were giving Wickremesinghe a month or two and if not satisfied would restart their protests.

Wickremesinghe has given his answer. The opposition of working people to the intolerable living conditions they confront will be answered with military violence.

At a press conference on Friday, JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva condemned the attack on anti-government protesters but sought to cover up the underlying source of the military violence. He accused Wickremesinghe of protecting the Rajapakses, adding that he had been contracted by them to take revenge against the protesters who forced them from office.

Wickremesinghe, however, is not acting on behalf of the Rajapakses, but the ruling class as a whole, which is terrified by the mass popular uprising that has erupted. He is a class conscious representative of the bourgeoisie who understands that the capitalist economy is bankrupt, that no concessions can be made to working people and any opposition has to be savagely suppressed.

The JVP and the opposition parties that have been pushing for an all-party interim government would be driven to do exactly the same.

The military/police violence used against Galle Face protesters is a warning of what is to come if the parties of the capitalist class are left in power. It adds to the urgency of workers and rural toilers taking up the political initiative outlined by the SEP in its July 20 statement entitled "For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses!" It explained the necessity of convening such a congress "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."

To establish the foundations for convening the congress, the SEP calls on workers and rural toilers to build their own rank-and-file action committees in every workplace, factory, plantation, neighborhood and rural area to fight for their class interests. As the political establishment, the state apparatus and the military prepare further violence, workers should respond through their action committees with the intransigent defence of the democratic rights of the masses. The defence of democratic rights is indissolubly connected to the fight for socialist demands and the seizure of power from the corrupt and venal ruling elites that are determined to defend their wealth and privileges through every available means.

As the SEP statement declared, the call for a "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." This struggle is part of the broader political fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

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