

Peasants form action committee in southern Sri Lanka to fight government attacks

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On July 16, peasants from Palagoda in Tangalle, southern Sri Lanka, formed an independent action committee to fight the ongoing social attacks by successive Sri Lankan governments on their livelihoods.

The initiative marks an important milestone in the developing anti-government mass movement of the Sri Lankan working class and rural toilers. The decision expresses the aspirations of millions of peasants who have been hard hit by the economic and political attacks of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, and are determined to win their basic social and democratic rights.

The establishment of the Tangalle Agrarian Action Committee is significant for two main reasons: It was established under the political guidance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), as part of the campaign for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees initiated last year by the International Committee of the Fourth International. Secondly, it was formed in opposition to the treacherous trade unions, peasant organisations and other bourgeois outfits, all of which consistently work to prevent all mass struggles of peasants and workers challenging the capitalist profit system.

Sixteen peasants working as sharecroppers in Palagoda village, about 3 kilometres from Tangalle town in the Hambantota agricultural district, participated in the inaugural meeting. Most of those present are involved in cultivating crops as well as working day-to-day as odd job laborers to make ends meet.

The peasants not only have to pay all cultivation expenses but hand over a fourth of their harvest to the landlords. They face the loss of their crops to flooding during the rainy seasons, the lack of chemical fertilisers, and shortages of diesel for their agricultural machinery. Rural youth also confront high unemployment levels.

Opening the action committee's inaugural meeting, the convener, G. B. Padmasiri, said the old, previously dominant farmers' organisations had demonstrated their political bankruptcy and explained why new independent organisations, as proposed by the SEP, were necessary.

"As comrades know very well, we have experienced how [government agricultural] officers come here when convened

by official peasant organisations and how we engage in debates after presenting our problems before them. After these meetings end, however, none of the solutions materialise.

"Through this experience we understand why peasants need a new form of organisation and a program to find solutions to our problems," Padmasiri said.

Padmasiri learned about the SEP by reading the *World Socialist Web Site* and some books published by the party. He was attracted to the idea of action committees and understood why they were necessary to establish the foundations for a workers' and peasants' government committed to socialist policies. This, he realised, was the only viable solution to the pressing social needs of working people and the rural poor.

After his brief introduction, Padmasiri invited SEP Political Committee member Ratnasiri Malalagama to address the audience. He began by explaining the catastrophic situation confronting the peasants within the context of the escalating economic crisis.

While peasants, who do not have any other livelihood, cannot abandon farming, their ability to cultivate their crops has been drastically undermined, he said, referring in particular to the Rajapakse government's import bans on chemical fertilisers, insecticides and herbicides.

Notwithstanding Rajapakse government claims that it was concerned about preventing kidney diseases, the drastic import bans were due to lack of foreign exchange, Malalagama said.

"You know how this debt crisis impacts on your lives," he continued, but the solution sought by capitalist rulers is the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

"The IMF wants the government to repay its loans by cutting public expenditure. The increasing cost of fuel and all food items, and the destruction of hospital services and education now being carried out, is in line with that," he said.

The speaker explained that the popular uprising that forced out Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who initially came to power with 6.9 million votes, has shown the mass opposition to austerity and social destruction. He warned, however, that all the capitalist and pseudo-left parties were working together to divert this movement behind another bourgeois government, an interim all-party government.

All the opposition parties, Malalagama continued, support

going to the IMF and implementing its demands. Organisers of the Galle Face Green protests, including the Frontline Socialist Party and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, he said, are also diverting the protests into this trap, which is to “buy time” for the ruling elite to brutally suppress the popular uprising.

The speaker explained that the social catastrophe is not limited to Sri Lanka and cited the struggle by millions of peasants in India who had demonstrated in New Delhi for about a year against the Modi government’s pro-corporate agricultural “reforms.” Sri Lankan health workers, plantation workers and teachers had formed action committees during the mass protest against the Rajapakse government, Malalagama said and outlined the SEP’s basic policies.

*** 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!**

*** Seize the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations!**

*** Cancel all debts of poor and marginal farmers and small business holders! Reinstatement of all subsidies, including fertiliser subsidies for farmers! Abolish the feudal share-cropper system! Give the lands to share-croppers who cultivate them!**

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

Malalagama quoted from the April 7 SEP statement: “The fight for this program provides a way forward and will imbue the working class with confidence in its capacities, draw the rural masses to its side and, through the development of a network of Action Committees, provide the organisational foundations for the working class to take power and establish a workers’ and peasants’ government to begin the socialist reorganisation of society.”

Following Malalagama’s report, there were questions and answers about the program of action. There was also discussion on fuel shortages which are stopping paddy fields cultivation in the Tangalle area. Peasants said they were not even able to cultivate rice for their own consumption.

Audience members said that even though Grama Niladhari [a village officer] and assistant agricultural officers had provided letters certifying farmers’ fuel requirements, they had done nothing to supply fuel. The peasants said every officer and institution had abandoned their responsibilities. They also said it was impossible in the current circumstances to comply with government directives telling them to immediately begin cultivation to overcome food scarcities.

Meeting participants agreed that it was necessary to form a network of action committees in order to develop united action

over the issues confronting the peasants. Accordingly, the audience decided that the meeting should make an appeal for the establishment of similar action committees in the other provinces at the initiative and guidance of the Tangalle Agrarian Action Committee.

Intervening in the discussion, SEP representatives explained the need for building action committee alliances between the working class and the peasantry in fighting for solutions for problems they confronted.

The following resolution was presented, discussed and unanimously adopted.

“The living conditions of millions of people have deteriorated drastically due to deepening economic crisis of the country. Peasants have been hard hit by brutal attacks unleashed on behalf of international capital, including the IMF.

“Based on a proper program, the Tangalle Agrarian Action Committee will fight to resolve the innumerable problems, including lack of fuel and fertilisers and reasonable prices for their harvest. To this end, we invite the peasants in other provinces and the workers at various fields and the toiling masses to form a network of such action committees.

“This Agrarian Action Committee does not have any relationship with any of the capitalist parties that have subjected the masses to immense hardships for decades. At the same time, we warn that the so-called all-party government to be formed with the participation of all the capitalist parties will continue the attacks unleashed by the previous governments. We are opposed to such a government.

“We express our complete support for the building of a democratic and socialist congress of workers and rural masses to fight for the bringing of a socialist government of workers and peasants to power, which alone has the ability to provide real solutions for the problems confronting the masses.”



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