

Sri Lankan government widens its arrests and police-state measures

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The government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe is intensifying its repressive actions amid growing opposition among workers and anti-government protesters.

* The president issued a gazette notification at midnight on Wednesday extending its repressive Essential Public Services Act (ESPA) which designates the supply of electricity, the supply and distribution of petroleum products and the health sector as essential services.

According to this draconian act, any employee in these sectors who does not attend work faces “conviction, after summary trial before a magistrate” and will be “liable to rigorous imprisonment” of two to five years and/or a fine of between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees (\$US5–13).

The “movable and immovable property” of those convicted can be seized by the state and his or her name “removed from any register maintained for profession or vocation.” It is also an offence for any person to “incite, induce or encourage any other person” to not attend work through a “physical act or by any speech or writing.”

These repressive measures are in force while the Trade Union Coordinating Centre, which comprises unions in the health, electricity and petroleum sectors, have announced a one-day protest on August 9 against the government’s crackdown on protesters. The unions have taken the decision to deflect the growing anger among workers over intolerable price rises and acute shortages and Wickremesinghe’s anti-democratic actions.

* On Wednesday evening, police arrested Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Ceylon Teachers’ Union (CTU), at the union’s head office. The police claimed the arrest was due to the violation of a court order banning a protest march near police headquarters on May 28. Fort magistrate Thilina Gamage yesterday ordered the union leader to be remanded until August 12.

Police also arrested the secretary of the Bank of Ceylon branch of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, Dhananjaya Siriwardana, and its former branch president, Palitha Atampala. They were accused of forcibly entering the Presidential residence on July 13. Both union leaders were

released on bail yesterday.

* The police yesterday issued an ultimatum to anti-government protesters who are still occupying one corner of the Galle Face Green to vacate the area before 5 p.m. today. The police notice read out to protesters yesterday stated that they were occupying the area illegally and faced legal action if they did not leave.

At a media conference, protesters declared they would not vacate the area and had filed a court appeal requesting a writ order to prevent police forcibly clearing the area.

On July 22, hundreds of heavily-armed police and a military contingent mounted an early morning attack to forcibly evict protesters occupying the Presidential Secretariat and the surrounding area. Many were injured and nine were arrested.

Last week protesters refused to leave Galle Face Green until Wickremesinghe steps down. They are now confined to a government-designated “protest site” in Galle Face Green.

These repressive measures come in the wake of raids by two police teams on the Colombo office of the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) last Friday. The police ignored the opposition of FSP members, claiming they were searching for the convener of the Inter-University Student Federation, Wasantha Mudalige.

According to the media, more than 100 protest activists have already been arrested by police and military squads.

Officers of the Department of Immigration Emigration have barged into the home of British social media activist Kayleigh Frazer on August 3 and confiscated her passport. Police accused her of supporting anti-government protests on her Facebook page. However, when questioned by the media, the officials declared that the “department is yet to determine whether she has violated her visa conditions.”

While the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has fundamental political differences with the union leaders, the FSP and protest organisers, we unequivocally condemn all of these arrests and police actions.

The SEP warns working people that the Wickremesinghe regime is preparing a far broader repression against all

opposition to its severe austerity measures that are creating enormous hardship and suffering. We call on workers and rural toilers to demand the immediate dropping of all charges and release of those arrested.

A protest organised on Galle Face Green on August 3 demanded an end to police repression and the current state of emergency, and the resignation of Ranil Wickremesinghe and his government. Another protest organised by the Trade Union and Mass Organisation (TUMO) yesterday called for the immediate release of Joseph Stalin, other trade union leaders and anti-government protestors.

The trade unions, however, bear political responsibility for opening the door to these police-state measures by deliberately limiting the strike movement that developed among workers in opposition to intolerable living conditions. In doing so, they gave the ruling class vital time to prepare its counter-offensive.

Millions of workers participated in the strikes of April 28, May 6 and then on May 10 and 11 against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse who fled the country on July 13 amid mass protests. The TUMO and Trade Union Coordinating Centre not only did all they could to limit the scope and duration of the strikes but sought to divert the movement into the dead-end of parliamentary manoeuvres.

Their demand for an “interim government” was completely in line with that of the opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). None of the parliamentary parties, however, have any fundamental disagreement with the anti-working class agenda of the Rajapakse and now Wickremesinghe government to force working people to pay for the deep economic crisis of capitalism.

In his policy statement to parliament on Wednesday, Wickremesinghe reiterated his determination to impose the savage austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While imposing a state of emergency and launching a police dragnet, he cynically declared that the government would allow “peaceful protests” at government-designated sites and would open a “hotline” for protesters to express their grievances to him.

This is nothing but a transparent façade for police-state repression. If the Wickremesinghe regime has not launched a full-scale crackdown on all opposition, it is only because the ruling class is extremely nervous about unleashing an eruption of opposition by workers and the rural poor. Wickremesinghe is testing the waters, denouncing more militant protesters as “fascists” and arresting them while preparing for far more savage police-state measures.

The entire political establishment, including all the “opposition parties,” back the IMF’s austerity program which cannot be implemented democratically. Workers

should draw the necessary conclusion: the fight for democratic and social rights is completely bound up with the struggle to abolish capitalism on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

The SEP demands:

Release all those arrested in the struggle against the government!

Repeal the Essential Public Services Act!

Repeal the Emergency regulations!

To fight for these demands, we call on workers and rural toilers to form their own action committees in every workplace, plantation, suburb, town and village, completely independent of all the capitalist parties and their trade union and pseudo-left agents. The SEP is campaigning for a “Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses” on the basis of these action committees and to fight for the rights of workers and the poor.

The ruling class demands sacrifice by working people to defend its property and profits. The SEP demands measures to meet the pressing needs of the masses, including workers’ democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential items, the nationalisation of the banks, major corporations and plantations under democratic public control, the seizure of the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations, and the repudiation of all foreign debts.

We urge action committees to link up and begin the fight for these necessary measures and at the same time oppose the Wickremesinghe government’s mounting attacks on democratic rights. On the basis of a democratic and socialist program, the working class can rally the rural masses to its side and lay the basis for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies as an integral part of the fight for socialism internationally.



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