

Reject all-party regime! No to IMF austerity! Fight to build Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka warns that President Ranil Wickremesinghe's appeal last week for opposition parties to join an all-party government is aimed at consolidating a capitalist regime that will impose the IMF's savage austerity program and wage an all-out class war against workers and the poor.

Any all-party or interim government will be an instrument for suppressing the opposition of the working class and rural toilers on their democratic and social rights. The SEP is calling instead for the urgent building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on their own independent action committees as a means of fighting for their class interests against the relentless assault of the crisis-ridden ruling class.

Wickremesinghe, a veteran pro-US political hack and IMF enforcer, was appointed as acting president by former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on July 14 as he fled the country amid mass protests. He was installed as president on July 20 by an anti-democratic vote in the discredited parliament. In the past month, Wickremesinghe imposed draconian emergency laws giving him sweeping powers to deploy the military to make arbitrary arrests, proscribe parties and organisations, ban strikes, and censor the media.

In one of his first acts as president, Wickremesinghe ordered the military and police to violently evict anti-government protesters from the presidential secretariat and vicinity on July 22. Last week, as police arrests of protest and union leaders intensified, he extended the Essential Public Services Act to ban strikes and industrial action in key economic sectors.

Now Wickremesinghe is seeking the open support of the entire Colombo political establishment for the ruling-class agenda of austerity and repression. In his policy statement to parliament last Wednesday, he declared the country was facing an unprecedented economic crisis. "We are in great danger," he said, urging the opposition parties to "unite in the formation of an All-Party Government... for the sake of the country."

When Wickremesinghe talks of the "great danger," he above all means the threat to the capitalist class and its power, privileges and wealth posed by the mass opposition to the present intolerable living conditions. Three months of mass protests and general strikes involving millions of workers on April 28, May 6, 10 and 11 have shaken bourgeois rule to the core and forced the resignation of Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Now Wickremesinghe is appealing to the political establishment to set aside any tactical differences in order to wage a unified counter-offensive against the working class and the oppressed masses.

The president outlined the "unfavourable international economic factors," including the Ukraine war and COVID-19 pandemic, that have created an unprecedented economic crisis in Sri Lanka. The World Bank predicts the Sri Lankan economy will contract by 7.6 percent this year. Imports of essential food, fuel and medicines have been cut to the bone as foreign exchange has dried up. Inflation in July hit 60 percent, while food inflation skyrocketed to 90 percent, creating immense hardships.

In the name of "revitalising" and "modernising" the economy, Wickremesinghe is preparing to impose new burdens on working people. His aim of creating a budget surplus by 2025, from a deficit of 12.2 percent last year, can only be achieved through a huge increase in taxes, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, an end to the remaining meagre price subsidies, the privatisation of all state enterprises and further deep inroads into public services, such as education and health care.

To implement this anti-working-class agenda, Wickremesinghe proposed "a new constitution with new attitudes" that would establish a "National Assembly consisting of political party leaders," and a "People's Assembly, a mechanism to obtain views of all interested parties," including various organisations.

These proposed mechanisms have no democratic content whatsoever. Rather, the proposals are to rally the corrupt political parties, middle-class "civil society" groups and trade unions against workers and the rural poor.

The anti-democratic character of this agenda is evident in Wickremesinghe's slanderous attacks on anti-government protesters as "fascists" and "terrorists" to justify the police crackdown that is underway. While protest and trade union leaders are the ones being arrested at present, his government is preparing far wider repression against any opposition to his austerity agenda, who will likewise be branded "fascists" and "terrorists."

Speaking at a meeting organised by the think tank Advocata, Wickremesinghe challenged anyone to present an alternative to the IMF, warning that the "first six months will be difficult ... [but there is] no other way except to bite the bullet."

None of the parliamentary opposition parties has an alternative to the IMF's austerity program. Virtually all of them praised the presidential policy statement as a "positive" one.

Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) leader Sajith Premadasa, who had earlier refused to work with Wickremesinghe, did an abrupt about-face on Friday and held talks with the president. "Some [points in the discussion] were positive some negative. But all agreed to explore

how to help Sri Lanka out of crisis,” an SJB leader declared after the discussion and promised further talks.

The Muslim parties allied to the SJB, including the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, and the plantation-based trade unions that act as political parties—the National Union of Workers and Democratic Workers Front—have all expressed their willingness to join Wickremesinghe. The plantation-based Ceylon Workers Congress has also agreed to join the anti-working-class line-up.

The rump Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by former President Maithripala Sirisena has all but agreed to join an all-party regime, attacking other parties for seeking to “sabotage” the move. The SLFP has just nine parliamentarians because five have already defected to the government and accepted ministerial posts.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which represents the Tamil ruling elites, has also had discussions with Wickremesinghe and agreed to further talks. It has, however, agreed in principle to the all-party proposal.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is not opposed to an all-party government as such but declared that it will not take part in the one proposed. JVP Anura Kumara Disanayake complained that the party’s own proposal for an interim all-party government with rights for “each party can make contribution” had not been considered. The JVP is calling for a “snap election” in a desperate attempt to give legitimacy to the thoroughly discredited parliament and block any independent action by workers and the rural poor.

Likewise, the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) is wary about supporting any government headed by widely detested Wickremesinghe. FSP leader Kumar Gunaratnam has declared that the president’s proposal was to suppress mass opposition and called on the parliamentary opposition parties to reject it and join the FSP in “mass struggle.” In other words, the FSP is seeking to keep workers and rural toilers tied to the bourgeois opposition parties that are committed to implementing the same IMF policies as Wickremesinghe.

The trade unions have played a treacherous role in limiting the mass strikes in April and May in duration and in political scope to the demand for an interim capitalist government. Now sections of the trade union apparatus are openly lining up with Wickremesinghe.

Federation of Health Professionals leader Ravi Kumudesh met with Wickremesinghe on Saturday, making clear that he would do all in his power to prevent further strikes. “We can’t afford to struggle frequently. This is a time [when], we all should get together and sacrifice and build the country. Only you can make that change happen,” he told the president.

Workers should have no confidence in any of these parties and organisations, all of which agree with Wickremesinghe that there is no alternative but to accept the IMF’s austerity demands. The SEP alone has outlined an alternative socialist program for which the working class and rural masses can fight against the intensifying hardships that the government is imposing on behalf of the capitalist class and international finance capital.

The SEP has rejected any support or any involvement in an interim capitalist government of any sort. We call on workers and rural toilers to take matters into their own hands and form democratically-elected action committees in every workplace, plantation, suburb, town and village, completely independent of trade unions and every bourgeois party.

In opposition to the IMF’s dictates, the SEP has outlined a series of policies to address the pressing needs of working people and for

which action committees can take up the fight. These include: working class control of 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.

The fight for the essential social rights of working people is inseparably connected to the struggle for democratic rights. The SEP calls for the immediate abolition of the autocratic executive presidency, repeal of all repressive laws, including the emergency, essential services and anti-terrorism legislation, and release of all political prisoners.

In opposition to any capitalist government, all-party, interim or otherwise, the SEP calls for a “Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses” based on delegates elected by action committees as the necessary political lever for workers and the poor to fight for their social and democratic rights.

In its July 20 statement, the SEP explained that such a congress “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.”

The SEP calls on workers to strenuously oppose any attempt to whip up Sinhala chauvinism or Tamil communalism that has repeatedly been used by the ruling class to divide working people and weaken the fight for a socialist solution to crises created by capitalism. The ally of workers and the poor in this struggle is the international working class which is also coming into struggle in country after country against rising inflation and job and wage cuts.

Sri Lankan workers can coordinate and unify their struggles and with those of workers internationally by linking their action committees to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

We urge workers and youth to join the SEP to fight for this program.



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