

Protests held across Sri Lanka against Wickremesinghe government repression

Our reporters
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Thousands of workers, youth and students demonstrated in major cities and provincial towns across Sri Lanka on Tuesday to voice their outrage over the ongoing police repression of anti-government protesters.

Tuesday's demonstrations were called by two union fronts—the Trade Union Coordinating Centre (TUCC) and the Trade Unions and Mass Organisations Movement (TUMO)—and the United People's Movement, who were compelled to call the action in response to widespread anger over the arrest of dozens of protesters.

In early April, tens of thousands of anti-government campaigners began occupying Galle Face Green in central Colombo to demand the ouster of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government and an end to escalating prices and the scarcity of essentials. They later occupied the nearby presidential secretariat.

Millions of workers struck nationwide on April 28, May 6 and on May 10 and 11. This was followed on July 9 by the largest protest in Sri Lankan history, which saw demonstrators enter and occupy the presidential palace, forcing the President Rajapakse to flee the country and relinquish the presidency. Protesters later occupied the prime minister's official residence and office.

After being appointed acting president, and then officially sworn in as president, Wickremesinghe imposed draconian state of emergency measures, denounced anti-government campaigners as “fascists” and “terrorists,” and unleashed a nationwide police witch hunt. A joint police-military operation on July 22 brutally evicted protesters occupying the presidential secretariat and its vicinity, arresting nine people and injuring dozens.

The demonstrations this Tuesday were held in Colombo, Maharagama and Homagama, as well as in more distant locations, including Anuradhapura, Mahiyanganaya, Welimada, Ampara, Badulla, Galle, Balangoda, Hambantota, Hatton, Kurunegala, Kantale, Puttalam, Ambalangoda, Meerigama and Kegalle.

Protesters carried banners and placards declaring, “Stop the repression of Ranil-Rajapakse government,” “Release all arrested protesters,” “All-party government is a trap—line up for peoples' power,” and “Dissolve the parliament, give way to the peoples' voice.”

TUMO supporters demonstrated outside Fort Railway Station in Colombo while around one thousand students from Kelaniya University, which is on the outskirts of Colombo, gathered outside the university in protest against the government repression. The TUCC mobilised about one thousand workers and supporters at the Viharamahadevi Park in central Colombo and then marched to Independence Square where it held a rally.

Although workers and youth joined these protests, the two trade union centres organised these events to deflect the mass anger. Fearful of mobilising workers against the repression and in defence of democratic rights, the union bureaucrats limited the action to a token exercise and made no calls for workers to strike and join the protests.

The TUCC is dominated by the unions affiliated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which seeks to subordinate the protest movement to its campaign for an interim government made up from the discredited parliamentary parties and for a general election.

A prominent partner of the TUCC is the Federation of Health Professionals, which is led by Ravi Kumudesh. Last Saturday, he met with Wickremesinghe, pledged his support, and voiced his opposition to any continuation of the anti-government struggles.

TUCC leaders, along with various “civil society” groups, including Buddhist monks, issued a so-called “citizens decree” at Independence Square. This includes appeals to the Wickremesinghe government to stop its state repression, release detained protesters, lift all State of Emergency and Prevention of Terrorism Act measures and for the introduction of very limited welfare measures. It also demanded a new constitution, limiting powers of

the executive president, and an interim government for a short period, followed by a parliamentary election.

The TUCC and TUMO campaigns are both aimed at sowing illusions in the discredited parliament and the capitalist system and to tie the working class and the oppressed masses to the existing bourgeois parties.

The TUMO, which is backed by the Frontline Socialist Party, demonstrated in front of the Fort Railway Station. Its leaders demagogically denounced the Wickremesinghe regime, declaring that they were ready chase it out like Rajapakse. But as at the TUCC protest, they chanted slogans demanding an interim government and a general election while making a futile appeal to Wickremesinghe to stop the repression.

Both union alliances are hostile to the independent mobilization of the industrial and political strength of the working class to defend its democratic and social rights.

When millions of workers walked out on strike on April 8 and May 6, rallying nationwide support from the oppressed masses, the trade unions diverted this into calls for an interim government and elections.

By blocking a nationwide political and industrial struggle against the government, and the capitalist profit system, the trade unions paved the way for the current and ongoing police repression.

Wickremesinghe's denunciations of anti-government demonstrators as "fascists" and "terrorists" and the arrests of protesters are not isolated actions, but preparation for far broader attacks on democratic rights.

The police-military repression and other draconian measures, such as the State of Emergency, extension of the Essential Public Services Act, and mobilisation of the military in all districts, continue across the island.

The Wickremesinghe administration, which faces a grave economic crisis, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, is determined to implement all the International Monetary Fund's demands and to suppress the inevitable working-class resistance to these attacks.

On Tuesday, the government increased electricity rates by over 75 percent and plans to hike water rates by a similar amount later this week. It has also appointed a committee to restructure the Ceylon Electricity Board. Its agenda includes the privatisation of all state-owned enterprises, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, the slashing of subsidies and higher taxes. Wickremesinghe is pushing for an all-party government with trade union support to unleash these savage attacks.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has repeatedly explained, the ruling class and its government cannot peacefully implement these attacks and are preparing to intensify their repressive measures.

The SEP intervened in Tuesday's protests against on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. SEP members and supporters distributed hundreds of copies of two key statements: "Reject the all-party regime! No to IMF austerity! Fight to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses!" and "For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses in Sri Lanka!"

One protester at the TUCC march said: "I had to close my small business because of the crisis. The cost of living is skyrocketing and the government is escalating repression. I agree with you that an all-party government would be established to impose IMF conditions. We need an alternative."

Two students watching the demonstration voiced their concerns and explained the difficulties they face due to the virtual collapse of the public education system.

"We are doing the Advance Level [university entrance] exam for the second time but we can't get money for home tuition classes as we previously could. All the costs have gone up exorbitantly. The power cuts are also a problem," they said.

An employee from Hatton Education Zonal said: "The Ranil Wickremesinghe government is already implementing austerity measures. It has already started to remove our rights and allowances, and other things are being cut. It will go ahead with the IMF demands for privatisation."



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