

Sri Lankan workers and youth support SEP public meeting opposing state repression

Our correspondents
22 September 2022

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka have been campaigning for their online public meeting—"Stop the repression of anti-government protesters! Release all political prisoners!"—this coming Sunday.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government has launched a vicious state crackdown against anti-government protesters. Several thousand, including prominent activists involved in recent demonstrations, have been arrested, while more than one thousand are still being held in remand or detention camps. Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) is being used to detain the activists for months.

The real target of this repression is the working class which will inevitably come into struggle against the government's austerity measures being implemented as part of the International Monetary Fund's preconditions for an emergency loan.

SEP and IYSSE campaigners have spoken with workers, youth and the rural masses on the necessity for the independent mobilisation of the working class on a socialist program to defeat the government repression.

Madhawa, a Colombo school teacher, rejected Wickremesinghe's claims that he was only arresting people who had violated the constitution. "We cannot overthrow this rotten system and obey the constitution. It is a bourgeois constitution and is used to protect capitalist rule by unleashing state repression against workers," he said.

"It is crucial to think about why the popular uprising against the Rajapakse government, which involved the active support of millions of workers and the poor, is now facing unprecedented repression. What has changed that now makes this struggle open to a crackdown?" he asked.

Madhawa said he agreed with the SEP's fight for an independent political movement led by the working class. "I've participated in previous SEP meetings and believe this coming meeting will also provide the much-needed program to fight this repression."

R. Mohammed, a Gampola hospital worker in the central province, said that he rejected the idea that a new government ruler should be given time in order to test them out.

"What Wickremesinghe did straight after he came into office was to unleash an attack on the working class. Elected in the parliament without any public mandate he unleashed his repressive measures faster than any leader before him had ever done. This needs to be stopped," he said.

Mohammed referred to Government Nursing Officers Association leader Saman Rathnapiya who had said Wickremesinghe should be given some time. "Actually, the union leaders are the ones who have given time to Wickremesinghe and allowed him to prepare his attacks even more ruthlessly," he said.

"This repression is just a rehearsal because the government knows the working class will stand up against its austerity policies even more widely in the future. We need to understand these dangers and develop our power. I want to participate in this meeting and learn more about it, and I'm contacting another interested group from our hospital."

A **Colombo Harbour maintenance worker** said: "Living itself is such a struggle now because the government is implementing International Monetary Fund demands and driving up inflation by increasing electricity and water tariffs. Jobs and wages are also being gutted through privatisation. The government is deeply afraid of the developing protests and strikes, which is why those involved in the anti-government protests are being taken into custody.

"We need to prepare a counter-offensive against this. Demonstrations and meetings should be organised with workers and all the toiling masses mobilised. I agree with your proposal for the establishment of action committees in every workplace and extend my complete support to building an action committee at the harbour. SEP members have made significant interventions to cut across the confusion being nurtured among the workers."

"Many of us believe that harbour workers and other workers should be united and so your meeting is important."

In my opinion, the working class is the revolutionary class and the other toilers and the poor have to be rallied around it,” he said.

Indika, a final year science student from Jaffna University, said: “I think there should be stronger public opposition against the repression. The government has been able to do this because the mass movement was watered down. It was then diverted by the action of its leadership who limited the movement to putting pressure on the capitalist rulers. The leadership was solely based on people’s spontaneous anger and did not have any serious working-class directives to clarify the political issues. This allowed the government to go ahead with its witch hunt.”

Wimanga, a first-year student from University of Sri Jayewardenepura, explained the economic hardships facing his family.

“Before the prices went up, our family was able to get enough food without any problems. Now, if my parents spend money on meals for when I’m at home, my brother goes without meals. I’m working part time at a restaurant near the university at the moment because I cannot ask for any money from my parents. And this is the situation facing many students,” he said.

Wimanga explained that he was active in the popular anti-government uprising against the Rajapakse government because he wanted to change the situation. “I’m so much against the repression of this entirely legitimate struggle, he said. “All the parties are discussing how to pass the burdens of this capitalist crisis onto the masses and now this massive repression is underway to suppress the people who are coming into struggles against it.”

Wimanga rejected claims by pseudo-left organisations, who are working hand in hand with the bourgeois opposition parties, that Wickremesinghe could be pressured to change course.

“We cannot expect anything from the capitalist rulers who have come together in one front and are aligning with government austerity against working people. Students must unite with workers to fight for independent action committees for a genuine struggle,” he said.

A worker from UTP, a factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone, condemned the government’s witch hunting of protesters. He said police had arrested someone in Kurana, close to the free trade zone, detaining them for three months on bogus claims that he had been involved in lighting a fire in July at a hotel owned by a government minister.

“These are state sponsored witch hunts to suppress the protesters,” he said, and recalled the brutal repression of youth and the rural poor by the United National Party government, with Wickremesinghe as a cabinet minister, during 1989–90.

“Wickremesinghe is attempting to repeat this history but the workers have shown that they have the power to defeat such reaction. Gotabhaya Rajapakse had to go home because he was unable to face the strength of working people. This strength is realised when the people are united but what is needed is arming that strength with a correct political program,” he said.

An irrigation worker from Rathmalana said: “We supported the struggle to oust Rajapakse but now Wickremesinghe has come in and implemented state repression. Where can we go from here? The whole parliament is rotten and disgusting.”

SEP/IYSSE campaigners explained the need for independent action committees and a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses to fight for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies.

The irrigation worker responded: “What you explained is correct. The workers now face this repression but don’t know their real strength and how to counter the repression. The working class needs to be educated and I appreciate this work.

“What we need is a new leadership developed in the working class. We cannot depend on the capitalist class,” he added, agreeing to read and study the *World Socialist Web Site* and to participate in this Sunday’s public meeting.

The public meeting, which is at 4p.m., will be broadcast via Zoom and live-streamed on SEP’s Facebook page. Register here.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact