

“Through this brutality, Sri Lanka’s government is imposing IMF burdens on the people”: Support builds for SEP meeting against state repression

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) has received many comments supporting the online meeting that it and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are holding this Sunday: “Stop the repression of anti-government protesters! Release all political prisoners!”

The newly installed “interim” government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe has mounted a brutal assault on students and activists in the mass anti-government protests that convulsed the island from late March through mid-July and chased Gotabaya Rajapakse from power.

Security forces have savagely attacked protesters and made mass arrests under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. More than a thousand detainees are still being held in mass internment camps.

The state crackdown is aimed at intimidating the working class as the government implements a program of brutal IMF-dictated austerity measures. Sunday’s meeting is part of the SEP’s struggle to mobilize the working class as an independent political force, rallying the rural masses behind it, to defend democratic rights, oppose austerity, and—through the building of a network of workplace and neighbourhood committees—to lay the basis for establishing workers’ power.

The political program advanced by the SEP and IYSSE has won wide support.

Thushini Kodagoda, an undergraduate student at the technology faculty of the University of Colombo said: “I cannot accept this kind of brutality by any government. Masses of people participated in the recent struggles for real reasons. Soaring fuel and food prices and shortages really affected their lives. That’s why we came in to the streets. Now the government is arresting people who very reasonably raised the problems that they face.

“Through this brutality, this intensifying state repression, the government is imposing the IMF burdens on the people.

They want to be able to put any kind of burden on our backs. Why should we accept that?”

“I agree with your point,” continued Thushini, “that the working class should be independent from the old trade unions and form their own organizations of genuine struggle. But I doubt that the working class has the required knowledge for such a task.”

After the SEP supporters campaigning for the meeting explained that a revolutionary party must be built to politically arm the masses of workers now coming into struggle with an internationalist program and strategy, she appreciated the upcoming SEP meeting and said she wanted to participate in it.

Lohan Gunaweera, a visual and performance artist and translator said: “It is difficult to find someone who did not participate in the struggles against the Rajapakse government in some way or another. Hence, the government’s repression targeting participants in that struggle is a broader attack and a threat against all working people and oppressed.”

Recalling how the four-month popular uprising overthrew the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, forcing him to flee the country, Lohan said it showed “how weak the ruling class is. Therefore, this repression aimed at intimidating the working class can be identified as a sign of the weakness of the Wickremesinghe government, not its strength.

“But the crucial question is how did such an anti-democratic capitalist ruler like Wickremesinghe come to power after such a massive popular struggle? In the midst of this intensification of the class struggle, how did the ruling class get the chance to attack even more fiercely than before?

“It is my sincere conviction that we cannot organize a fight against government repression without finding answers to

these questions.

“Only the SEP and the WSWs have warned the working class about this. They concretely explained that the popular struggle against Rajapakse should be advanced on a socialist basis and under the leadership of the working class. Therefore, the meeting held by the SEP this Sunday is extremely important. Democratic rights can only be defended by mobilizing the strength of the working class to fight against the destructive policies of the capitalist class.”

Nandana, a non-academic school worker in Puttalam district, condemned the suppression of democratic rights: “The people are protesting because of the unliveable conditions. Parents face many problems. Not only can they not afford for their children’s bus fares, but even to give them proper meals because of poverty and high prices.”

Nandana recalled President Wickremesinghe’s statement that the anti-government protesters should be punished if they do not act in accordance with the constitution. “This means if we as workers and poor oppose anti-democratic government actions and fight for our social rights we should be punished! The constitution, judiciary and the police are part of the state that defends the capitalist system and its rule,” said the non-academic worker.

He pointed out the trade unions had been forced to call one-day general strikes in April and May because of the huge opposition building up among workers against the former President Rajapakse. “They limited our struggles and betrayed us,” said Nandana. “Rajapakse was replaced with Wickremesinghe. He is intensifying repression and implementing IMF policies, and the unions are supporting capitalism. That is why workers should form action committees in every workplace to fight for our rights.”

A railway worker at the Ratmalana workshop spoke out against the state attack against the anti-government protesters and explained why he planned to listen in on Sunday’s meeting.

The reason for this witch-hunt is that “the government wants to carry out their measures without any obstacles. We must oppose the arrests.”

He added that his friends and colleagues in the workshop are saying “that this is a warning to us. If we, as workers, also make protests we will have to face such harassments and intimidation.”

Explaining that the IMF dictates would affect the railway workers, he added: “Circulars have come insisting that workers above 55 years should retire, and all non-permanent workers should be terminated. The government says staffing-levels are ‘excessive.’ This is an indirect warning that they are moving toward privatization and implementing a hire-and-fire at will policy. Repression is also a warning that if you go for protests you would be arrested.”

Talking about the role of trade unions in his workshop, the worker said: “I have not heard anything from them. There is no talk about any action to oppose the repression. They have not even called a meeting to discuss these attacks.”

He said that he too had “joined the protests twice at Galle Face” in the centre of Colombo, the capital, then went on to observe that “even though tens of thousands of people participated in those protests,” the leaders “had not defined what” the needed changes were. “They did not take the leadership correctly.”

Malaka Devapriya, an award-winning filmmaker, stage director and radio playwright said: “The COVID-19 pandemic and the US war against Russia in Ukraine have created many economic and political crises around the world and in this country...”

“The capitalist crisis has pushed the current government to take authoritarian actions, so there is no room for democracy-based regimes within the capitalist system. This is the reason that the Wickremesinghe government has passed one repressive law after another. This repression is victimizing a broad section of political leaders, artists, workers and students.

“I accept that democratic rights can only be re-established as part of a broader struggle for socialism led by the working class.” Malaka encouraged workers, intellectuals, artists, and youth to participate in Sunday’s SEP meeting.

Wasantha Wijesiri, a development officer and a cartoonist said that “The inequality that we experience here is not limited to Sri Lanka. The leading imperialist countries, led by the United States, spend hundreds of billions on war. In return, the working and living conditions of tens of millions of workers are devastated. While a handful of billionaires are amassing wealth, the vast majority of the workers and the poor in society are suffering from poverty, hunger, malnutrition and pandemics.

“Even when it is obvious how the capitalist government is creating such a devastation, the pseudo-left and middle class groups continue to put pressure on them, promoting reforms to this rotten capitalism. A representative of the Sri Lankan pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party of Sri Lanka has gone to the United Nations Human Rights Council to complain about the repression of the Wickremesinghe government. This expresses their pro-capitalist nature.”



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