

Sri Lankan SEP/IYSSE meeting discusses a socialist program to fight state repression

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held an important online meeting entitled “Stop the repression of anti-government protesters! Release all political prisoners!” on September 25. It followed an extensive campaign among workers, students and youth in key cities.

The online event was watched on Zoom by about 70 people and several dozen others through the party’s Facebook page. In some areas, listeners gathered in groups to participate in the meeting, using the same device because of poor internet reception prevailing in many parts of the country. The meeting video has so far been viewed by over 1,000 people, with 350 others sharing it.

SEP Political Committee member W.A. Sunil, who chaired the meeting, detailed the wide-ranging repressive measures being unleashed against workers, students, and youth by President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s government.

“The government’s only solution to the economic crisis is a savage attack on social conditions as demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The ongoing state of repression is an attempt to crush all resistance to this social assault,” he said.

Sunil explained that thousands of anti-government protesters involved in popular demonstrations have been arrested since April. The most recent arrests were three Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) activists, including its convener, who were seized by police during a peaceful demonstration. They have been detained for 90 days by the Wickremesinghe government under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

“Notwithstanding our political difference with the IUSF and various other groups involved in the protests, the SEP condemns this vicious witch hunt. We demand the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and the dropping of all charges,” he said.

“The struggle being waged by the SEP and IYSSE against state repression and for the release of all political prisoners,” he continued, “is based on mobilising the working class to defend democratic and social rights. This involves campaigning for an international socialist perspective and for a workers’ and peasants’ government in Sri Lanka.”

SEP Political Committee member and leading IYSSE member Sakuntha Hirimuthugoda told the meeting that the escalating state repression was a serious warning to workers and youth who will inevitably come into struggle against the government’s social attacks.

Students and youth have repeatedly protested against state repression and for their basic democratic rights, he said. “In order to succeed, however, youth and students must politically reject those groups misleading them. The IUSF and the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) are turning students away from the working class, which is the only revolutionary force that can lead the struggle against capitalism, the source of these anti-democratic attacks.”

Hirimuthugoda cited a recent IUSF meeting, which was held in the name of building a “mass movement” against state repression. Those participating included capitalist parties, such as the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the trade unions and various fake-left groups. The speaker pointed out that SJB leaders were members of Wickremesinghe’s United National Party government which had ruthlessly repressed workers and the poor. The JVP had likewise supported state repression, he said.

Hirimuthugoda urged students and youth to reject the policies of the IUSF and FSP, saying they were a political trap, and urged them to study the revolutionary socialist perspective advanced by the SEP and IYSSE and join their ranks.

The concluding speaker, SEP Political Committee

member Pani Wijesiriwardena, began by pointing out that one day earlier President Wickremesinghe had issued an extraordinary gazette, classifying wide parts of Colombo as High Security Zones (HSZ). It was another intensification in the government crackdown and the use of dictatorial methods, he said, adding, “The SEP totally opposes this anti-democratic HSZ order and demands its immediate withdrawal.”

Rejecting Wickremesinghe’s previous claims that he was only acting against those violating the Sri Lankan constitution, Wijesiriwardena said: “In fighting for their interests, workers and the poor are not bound to obey the dictates of Wickremesinghe and the ruling elite.”

Referencing the pioneers of Marxism, Wijesiriwardena said: “The state is an organ of class rule. The capitalist state is the primary instrument used by the ruling class to maintain wage slavery, oppress workers and trample on their social and democratic rights.”

When the mass struggles erupted against the Rajapakse government in April and developed into general strike action involving millions, the FSP and other middle-class groupings, as well as the unions, called for an all-party interim government of parliamentary parties, the speaker continued.

“The FSP, and other like-minded organisations, pushed working people into the hands of the capitalist parties, paving the way for the Wickremesinghe government and the ongoing repression. The SEP urged workers to reject this all-party interim government trap from the very beginning and campaigned for the independent mobilisation of the working class on a revolutionary socialist perspective,” the speaker said.

“Social inequality, imperialist rivalry and wars, unemployment, inflation, poverty, malnutrition, and attacks on social-democratic rights have reached their highest levels since the Second World War. We can see millions of workers around the world now entering the class struggle against these attacks,” he said. Referring to international situation, he pointed out that the political turmoil in Sri Lanka was a sharp expression of this world crisis.

“As Trotskyists,” he continued, “we believe that the international working class is the only social force that can defend the social rights and democratic rights of the masses.”

Globalised production, he continued, has integrated the working class on an international scale and turned it into a giant social force. Wijesiriwardena then quoted David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of

the *World Socialist Web Site* and the US SEP, who said: “The working class has tremendous power if it knows how to use it.”

Wijesiriwardena concluded that the critical issue in defending democratic rights was by fighting for a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to the socialist reorganization of society. This, he said, was the significance of SEP’s campaign for a democratic and socialist congress of workers and rural masses based on representatives from independent action committees of workers and the oppressed masses. He called on all meeting participants to join the SEP.

A Facebook listener said that he was in full agreement with the SEP’s program but asked if there was a short-term program that could make this a reality. Answering the question, Wijesiriwardena said the SEP’s program was based on a scientific analysis of the objective situation, and that history has shown that so-called short-term programs peddled by the opportunists have created one disaster after another for the working class.

“To secure the rights of workers, there is an urgent need to abolish the office of the executive presidency and build an international anti-war movement to stop a destructive world war,” he said. This program, he said, became a reality in 1917 when the Bolsheviks responded to the crisis caused by World War I leading the working class to the seizure of power and the establishment of a workers’ state based the Soviets—democratic organs of workers and the oppressed masses.

Sunil answered a question about the nature of the action committees proposed by the SEP.

“The main concept behind the formation of working action committees is the independence of the working class from the capitalist class and pro-capitalist pseudo-left and trade unions,” he said.

“These action committees should be formed as part of an international alliance, which has been advanced by ICFI in its call for an International Workers Alliance of the Rank-and-File Committees. In the October revolution of 1917, such independent organisations of workers and peasants were the Soviets, and they became the instruments of revolution,” Sunil said.



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