

Sri Lanka: To fight for housing Kajimawatte residents need to build an independent action committee

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Sri Lankan urban authorities recently declared that 214 residents in Kajimawatte in Colombo, whose homes were recently destroyed by fire, have “not fulfilled minimum qualifications” to apply for a house from the government. It is yet another demonstration of the contemptuous attitude of the ruling class towards the urban poor, in particular, and the working class as a whole.

On October 16, the media reported that the Urban Development Authority (UDA) told the secretary to the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing that victims of the Kajimawatte fire could not be provided homes under its “Urban Regeneration Project” policy.

While 20 families have fulfilled “minimum qualifications” for receiving homes, it is not certain whether they would receive homes because, according to the UDA, there was not enough detail on their “minimum qualifications.”

This label is being applied to scores of families who have been living in Colombo’s shanty towns for decades, having been forcibly evicted from previous residential areas by the former government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. They were falsely promised homes after being resettled in Kajimawatte.

Notwithstanding this violation of their basic human right to proper housing, these “unqualified” residents are registered voters and have paid electricity and water tariffs, as well as taxes, for years.

The entire working class must condemn this brutal government policy. Along with all other working people, Kajimawatte residents confront skyrocketing inflation and harsh austerity measures by President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s government, in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictates. These include privatisation of public enterprises, the widening of tax net to include the majority of working people, and the freeing up of commercially valuable land in Colombo for investment and profit.

In a desperate bid to overcome depleted foreign reserves, the government is also moving to sell off public housing. According to media reports, a decision has been taken to give a 10 percent discount to those using US dollars to purchase

middle-income houses built by the UDA.

On September 6, the Minister of Urban Development and Housing, Prasanna Ranatunga told the daily *Aruna* that facilities had been provided to Sri Lankans living in foreign countries to purchase these houses with American dollars.

From 2014 onwards, residents from several parts of Colombo, including Applewatte, were resettled in Kajimawatte under President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government. This continued under the Maithripala Sirisena government’s so-called Megapolis project.

Although homes were granted to several families who provided deeds for their land under these schemes, some 200 families have lived in temporary substandard housing in Kajimawatte for the past 10 years.

As Professor Siri Hettige, a social scientist from the University of Colombo, told the *Mirror Citizen* in 2014, over 50 percent of the Colombo city’s population were low-income families. “What is happening today is not settling them in suitable housing but destroying the homes they have built and expropriating the commercially valuable lands.”

According to the Centre for Policy Alternative in 2016, between 280,000 and 500,000 residents were to be evicted from Colombo under “urban development” plans. In March 2016, about 200 homes were bulldozed by the UDA in Kajimawatte, destroying furniture, children’s books and even kitchen items.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, through the *World Socialist Web Site*, has published dozens of articles opposing and exposing the ongoing attacks by successive governments on the urban poor.

Kajimawatte residents who have lost their homes spoke to the WSWs, denouncing government claims that they did not fulfil “minimum requirements.”

One angry resident said: “We vote, pay assessment taxes, electricity and water tariffs and we have identity cards with the addresses in Kajimawatte. We also have the birth certificates of our children with these addresses, and have obtained character certificates from the Village Officer in the area. What other minimum qualifications are required? We are not going to leave here. Are we being told to go onto the streets with our

children?”

Another resident accused several television stations of censoring important information he had provided. Nawaz, a day labourer, said: “If we can’t live in Sri Lanka, being citizens of the country, then kill us. What is the qualification? I told this to the Hiruand Derana television channels but they did not broadcast it.”

He added: “Brigadier Samarasinghe [former official of UDA] organised a raffle among us [Kajimawatte residents], claiming that we would be given 57 houses. I got number seven on the tenth floor but it is still closed. I’ve still not received the key. We were cheated. It was like offering toffees to kids.”

Nawaz accused the government of attempting to create divisions among residents in the area by proposing to only provide 20 homes.

People who lost their shanty homes in the fire at Kajimawatte are now staying in a small store and nearby community centre with their children sleeping on cold cement floors. The storeroom, which is 30 metres long and 15 metres wide with a 4-metre wall. Light and air is only available through several small holes in the wall.

Unsuitable for human habitation, the room, which is currently accommodating 15 displaced families including children, is so dark that residents cannot identify each other, even during the day.

Rupa Dias, a grandmother looking after her small granddaughter lying asleep on a mat, said: “This is the youngest daughter of my son. His eldest daughter is 12 years old. She has gone to school wearing a coloured dress [because her school uniforms were destroyed in the fire]. My son is a day labourer but does not get work every day. Our house was totally destroyed. We have nothing now because everything was burnt. All these dresses have been given to us by others.” Dias explained that her family has lived in Kajimawatte for 10 years.

Janaka, who works at the fish market, faces the same situation: “My house was entirely burnt. I have three school-aged children, 15, 11 and 10 years old. All of them went to school wearing coloured dresses.” He denounced the government’s declared “minimum qualifications” for providing houses and said he was a Sri Lankan citizen. What other “qualifications” were needed to get a home, he asked.

WSWS reporters explained that the Sri Lankan government was forcibly appropriating commercially valuable lands from the poor in order to benefit property developers and investors. The fight to secure their rights to housing, they explained involved a fight against the government and the mobilisation of the working class on a socialist program. Kajimawatte residents, they explained needed to build their own action committees, independent from all the capitalist parties and their political hangers-on, to fight for decent housing and other basic rights.

Janaka referred to various politicians who claimed to be

“socialists” but later became government ministers. He mentioned Vasudeva Nanayakkara, a former leader of Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), Dew Gunasekera from Stalinist Communist Party, and Tissa Witharana from the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).

“After posturing that they speak for the workers, these politicians went to the parliament. But what have they done for the workers? Let’s take JVP too. They went to the parliament in 1994 and were involved in dealings with Mahinda Rajapakse. They were ministers in the Chandrika [Kumaratunga] government in 2004. But what did they do for us?” he asked.

WSWS reporters discussed how the LSSP joined a coalition government with the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1964 and betrayed the class independence of the working class.

“Left” leaders like Witharana fully supported this betrayal, WSWS reporters said. They explained the political origins and founding of the Revolutionary Communist League (the predecessor of the SEP), following the intervention of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against the LSSP’s betrayal. They also reviewed the JVP’s political record and outlined the RCL/SEP principled fight for the independent mobilisation of the working class.

Homeless Kajimawatte families and other Colombo residents facing the threat of eviction have to build action committees to fight for the basic social right of decent housing. Luxury housing schemes are being built throughout Colombo city, with wealthy individuals paying 50 million rupees per unit or more. These developments demonstrate that there are more than enough resources to fulfill the basic necessities including proper housing but they remain under the control of handful of wealthy individuals.

The social or economic rights of the working-class majority cannot be won while this social wealth is monopolised by the super-rich. That is why the SEP insists that this struggle has to be based on the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government and a socialist program that will nationalise the banks and major industries, including housing, and placed under the democratic control of the working class.

This requires the construction of action committees by workers and the urban and rural poor and the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of the Workers and Rural Masses. We urge workers, youth and the poor to join the SEP and build it as the mass revolutionary party to lead this struggle.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact