No to capitalist party-trade union fronts in Sri Lanka! Defeat government-IMF austerity measures! Build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
1 November 2022

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka stands with the workers, fighting against the government's savage attacks on their social and living conditions dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The purpose of the IMF austerity program is to squeeze the workers and poor in order to extract money to pay back debts to international finance capital and maintain the superprofits of big business.

In opposition to the government, opposition parties, trade unions and their fake "left" hangers-on, the SEP urges workers to take matters into their own hands and build independent action committees in workplaces, factories, plantations and neighbourhoods to fight for their basic social and democratic rights. We call on rural toilers to do the same.

On July 20, the SEP issued a call for workers and the poor to build the Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates elected from action committees as the political basis for organising a unified struggle for their class interests.

The SEP calls upon workers to reject the alliance of the trade unions and pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) with the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which are falsely claiming to oppose the government's attacks. Like the government, all these parties, unions and pseudo-lefts are committed to the IMF policies and are actively seeking to derail and suppress the rising unrest among the masses.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe is repeating the mantra that "there is no alternative other than the IMF." A few days ago he declared that "harder times are inevitable." Workers and the poor can imagine the dreaded times he is talking about, as many people are already skipping or curtailing meals because of unbearable inflation, joblessness and the lack of essentials, including basic foods and medicines.

Nationally, inflation hit 75 percent in September, with food inflation of 102 percent, sharply pushing down the real value of wages and the meagre income of the rural poor. The World Bank reported that by October poverty had nearly been doubled in one year to 25.6 percent. Peradeniya University has put the numbers below the poverty line as high as 45 percent of the population. Sri Lanka's economic contraction for this year is predicted to be 9.2 percent and will continue next year with the destruction of half a million more jobs. This is the burden that the capitalist class has heaped on working people.

The economic turmoil in Sri Lanka is part of the global economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. On the pretext of combatting inflation, the central banks are hiking up interest rates, compounding the debt crisis facing countries like Sri Lanka.

As unrest among workers has grown, the opposition parties, trade unions and fake lefts have intensified their efforts to derail and stifle any independent struggle of the working class.

Last Thursday, the Trade Union Coordinating Centre (TUCC) and Combined Mass Movement controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) held a public protest demanding the government provide an allowance for workers, reduce inflation and end state repression. JVP and union leaders declared the only solution was "chasing out the government" and holding a "general election" to elect a new government.

On November 2, another rally will be held by some unions in Colombo with the backing of the SJB and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) making similar demands. The FSP and its Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) played a major role in organising this front, saying this will be the "first step in ousting Wickremesinghe and the government."

Workers and rural toilers have had bitter experiences with such class collaborationist fronts since 1964, when the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) entered a coalition government with the bourgeois SLFP, betraying the political independence of the working class. They have gone through nearly three decades of racialist war waged by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), as well as bloody repression against Sinhala rural youth twice—in 1971 and 1988-90.

The JVP and SJB are campaigning for a general election to form a new government with the help of trade unions and "lefts." What

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for? They are claiming that such a government could impose the IMF's savage attacks on living conditions because Wickremesinghe does not have the legitimacy to do so.

Whatever their criticisms of the government, the opposition parties agree with Wickremesinghe that there is no alternative to accepting the IMF's draconian conditions for emergency economic relief. Last week these parties joined with the government to amend the constitution to make cosmetic changes to the executive presidency, but retaining its sweeping autocratic powers.

Workers need to draw the political lessons of the mass uprising from April to July. Millions of workers, poor and other sections battered by the economic crisis joined in a determined campaign to demand the resignation of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government and to end the country's disastrous social conditions. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse's government collapsed amid these huge protests and his brother Gotabhaya was forced to flee the country and resign.

However, the same trade unions and pseudo-left groups—which are claiming today to be fighting the Wickremesinghe regime—deliberately limited industrial action to one-day strikes on April 28 and May 6 and subordinated them to supporting the JVP and SJB's demands for an interim capitalist government, thereby blocking any independent political struggle of the working class. This betrayal paved the way for the right-wing government to continue with a new head, Wickremesinghe, a veteran IMF enforcer and US stooge.

Since assuming the presidency, Wickremesinghe has increasingly used its autocratic powers to suppress any opposition. He ordered a military-police crackdown on anti-government protesters, signed detention orders on IUSF activists under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and used the Essential Public Services Act against workers' struggles.

Moreover, with Wickremesinghe's direct support, the deeply discredited Rajapakse-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) is seeking to make a comeback and put off any elections until 2025.

Yet FSP leader Duminda Nagamuwa, in supporting the November 2 protests, declared: "The Rajapakses will rise up again if the opposition parties do not work together to defeat their attempts." In reality, the FSP and its bourgeois allies and the trade unions are directly responsible for derailing the mass movement and allowing the Rajapakses to reemerge.

The claim by the FSP and other pseudo-left groups that the SJB and JVP are a "lesser evil" compared to the Rajapakses is a lie. Any government that the opposition parties form will serve to defend capitalism by placing new burdens on the working people and repressing any opposition by the working class.

This year's mass upsurge has sharply revealed the danger posed by the lack of revolutionary leadership and political perspective in the working class. The SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, have consistently fought to provide this leadership. We insist that there is no solution to the enormous social problems confronting workers and the poor within the capitalist framework.

The SEP proposes that independent action committees of workers and rural toilers fight for the following demands to meet their pressing social needs:

* Repudiate all foreign debts! No to the austerity demands of the IMF and World Bank that represent the international bankers and financial institutions!

* Seize the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations!

* For workers' democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential items and other resources critical for the lives of working people! Nationalise the banks, big corporations, plantations and other major economic nerve centres!

* Cancel all debts of poor and marginal farmers and small business holders! Reinstate all subsidies, including fertiliser subsidies for farmers!

* Guarantee jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions! Index wages to the cost of living!

The implementation of this program is a burning necessity as millions of working people are being dragged into a living hell by successive capitalist governments and their predatory international financial mentors.

Our call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses constitutes a political strategy for the working class to consolidate its forces and go forward with the support of the rural masses to establish its own rule through a workers' and peasants' government committed to restructuring society on socialist lines.

Only by fighting for this revolutionary program can the working class defeat the reactionary manoeuvres of the Wickremesinghe regime, as well as those of the opposition parties.

The SEP's strategy is an integral part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. A powerful movement of the working class in Sri Lanka against the IMF's austerity agenda will immeasurably strengthen the confidence of workers throughout the region and internationally in their own class strength and win the oppressed layers of rural toilers to its side.

The allies of the Sri Lankan workers are their class brothers and sisters around the world, who are already engaged in similar struggles, including in the US and Europe, against inflation and job destruction. To coordinate their actions with the workers internationally, Sri Lankan workers should join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

We urge workers and youth to join the SEP to build it as the mass revolutionary party to lead this struggle.

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