Large police mobilisation blocks anti-government rally in Sri Lanka

Our reporters
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On Wednesday, hundreds of police were deployed by President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government stop a major rally in Colombo called by the pseudo-left, the trade unions and the opposition parliamentary parties.

Thousands of protesters gathered at Maradana in Central Colombo and began marching towards the Fort Railway Station where they planned to hold a demonstration. About one kilometre from their destination, however, protesters were blocked by over 500 police officers, including from the Police Riot Unit and the notorious Police Special Task Force (STF), and military personnel, who had erected a barricade across the road.

The protest was initiated by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), trade unions, such as the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) and Ceylon Bank Employees Union and various civil organisations. The two parliamentary opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—decided to participate.

The protest's main demands were for the release of three detained activists from the FSP-controlled Inter University Student Federation and all other political prisoners, and the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. They also denounced the rising cost of living.

Although organisers claimed they would bring 100,000 people to Colombo around 5,000 participated. The lower turnout, however, does not indicate any reluctance among workers, youth and the rural masses to fight the government's International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity. Rather, it underscores the fact that broad layers of the population have no confidence in those dominating the rally, particularly the widely discredited SJB and SLFP.

All these parties, the unions and the pseudo-left FSP are committed to the IMF program, including the privatisation and restructuring of public sector firms, higher taxes, public sector job cuts and the slashing of social subsidies. The SJB and SLFP are calling for a general election and the formation of a new capitalist government that would implement these social attacks.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which shares this commitment to the IMF-dictated measures, did not participate in Wednesday's rally because it regards the SJB as its principal rival in any future election. The JVP held a separate protest of several thousand people in Hyde Park on October 27 to demand a general election. It complains that the Wickremesinghe government is incapable of implementing the demanded austerity measures as it lacks legitimacy.

The FSP and trade unions, such as the CTU, have played a treacherous role in politically derailing the growing popular opposition against the Wickremesinghe government and attempting to tie it to the SJB and SLFP.

A week before Wednesday's protest, FSP leaders and senior union officials visited SJB and SLFP offices and signed an agreement with these parties to organise the protest as a common front. These organisations all fear the rising opposition of the working class to the Wickremesinghe government and are attempting to establish another bourgeois government.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has consistently warned the working class about the political dangers of an alliance of the bourgeois parliamentary opposition parties, pseudo-left and unions.

In a statement issued on Tuesday, the SEP reviewed the bitter historical experience of the Sri Lankan working class with such fronts, beginning in 1964, when the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) entered a coalition government with the SLFP and betrayed the political independence of the working class and

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socialist internationalism.

"The SEP calls upon workers to reject the alliance of the trade unions and pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party with the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which are falsely claiming to oppose the government's attacks," the statement said.

Once Wednesday's protest confronted the police-military barricade, SJB leader Sajith Premadasa climbed on top of a vehicle, demagogically denounced the government, and then called for an end to the rally. He was jeered by some protesters who demanded that the action continue and that they break through the barricade.

After SJB and SLFP leaders and their supporters left the demonstration, FSP and trade union leaders vowed to "come back" and the rally fizzled out.

Addressing the crowd, CTU leader Joseph Stalin said, "All the parties were united against the President and the government… [I]n a few days, we will return to Colombo with a large group of people." In other words, Stalin and the FSP leadership will continue to promote their reactionary front with the SJB and SLFP as an "alternative" to the Wickremesinghe regime.

The Wickremesinghe government has repeatedly unleashed state forces to break up public protests. Its reaction to last Wednesday's rally is another warning to the working class and the rural toilers that Colombo is preparing massive repression to crush the rising opposition to the IMF-dictated measures.

On Wednesday, police sent a letter to the protest organisers declaring that no permission had been granted for the event because it could "block the roads in Colombo" and "pose obstructions to the public."

Police also claimed it would "delay the shipping of freight containers expected to reach Colombo from the Biyagama, Wathupitiwala, and Kandy Economic Zones and thus impacting the country's economy" and "the movement of tourists." The letter warned that "if there is any traffic congestion or obstruction, necessary measures will have to be taken as per the Police Ordinance and other laws to remove such inconveniences caused to the public."

A day before the protest, several major Sri Lankan business chambers demanded organisers "call off protests of this nature that could undermine the efforts being taken to resolve the current economic crisis with the support of the international community… Any act of destabilisation taking place at this time and any negative publicity arising from it would seriously derail actions that are being taken to revive the economy, including the efforts being taken to promote tourism."

This intervention further underscores the immense fear of big business over the rising working-class opposition to the government's social attacks. The capitalist elites will not tolerate any disruption of their profit interests.

Like their counterparts around the world, the Sri Lankan ruling class are determined to impose the whole burden of the country's economic crisis, which has been deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia, on all working people.

In an October 19 address to the nation, Wickremesinghe vowed that his government would implement the IMF reforms, warning that "harder times are inevitable." At the same time, his government is providing concessions to big business and investors, including generous tax relief and infrastructure facilities.

As Tuesday's SEP statement explained, "There is no solution to the enormous social problems confronting workers and the poor within the capitalist framework," which is why the SEP calls for "the building of independent action committees of workers and rural toilers to fight for their demands."

The working class needs, as the statement outlined, "a political strategy 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."

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