

Sri Lankan workers need action committees to fight IMF austerity measures

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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During this week, the trade unions have called limited and scattered protests in a bid to defuse the mounting anger in the working class over the Sri Lankan government's ruthless budget attacks on jobs, conditions and essential services.

Two trade union groupings—the Trade Unions Coordination Centre (TUCC) and Trade Unions and Mass Organisation Collective (TUMOC)—as well as unions at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), Sri Lanka Railways, Colombo Port and two main Free Trade Zones in Katunayake and Biyagama called protests on December 5, 6 and 8.

By scheduling the protests in lunch time or after working hours, the unions have given a clear signal to the government and employers that they will do nothing to affect operations in workplaces and factories. At the same time, the unions are fostering illusions in the capitalist opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—all of which back the IMF demands.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon workers to take matters into their own hands by forming action committees, independent of all capitalist parties and the trade unions, in every workplace, factory and neighbourhood to fight for their democratic and social rights. We call rural toilers to do the same.

The government's austerity program includes heavy taxes on the working masses and ending price subsidies for electricity, water, fuel and fertilizer. Spending on education and health are on the chopping block. President Wickremesinghe announced in his budget speech that Sri Lanka Telecom, Sri Lanka Insurance, Sri Lankan Air Lines and government-owned tourist hotels are to be sold to provide desperately needed foreign currency. Last week cabinet approved the break up of the Ceylon Electricity Board into 15 companies,

to facilitate its sell-off.

The privatization is a two-pronged attack to the working masses. On the one hand, the price for essential goods and services will be further increased to ensure private profits. On the other hand, workers will be laid off and the workloads for the remaining workers will be increased, again to boost profits.

After keeping silent over the implications of the government's budget, the unions have been prompted to call for protests, not because of concern over jobs and conditions, but by the mounting anger of workers. Above all they fear another uprising of the working class as took place from early April that led to the collapse of the previous government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

These unions, particularly two main union fronts—TUCC and TUMOC—backed by pseudo-left organisations like the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), were crucial in betraying the popular uprising against Rajapakse. Although they were forced to call general strikes on April 28 and May 6, the unions limited these actions to one day. The unions falsely claimed that the call by opposition parties for an interim government would assist working people.

Now these same unions have called limited protests claiming that pressure will force the government to withdraw its harsh measures. The TUMOC has called its protest for December 8, the day the budget is to be finally approved in the parliament, in line with its orientation to the bourgeois opposition parties and the whole parliamentary framework.

There will be no solution to the burning issues confronting working people within the capitalist system and framework of bourgeois parliament. The SJB and JVP which are campaigning for general elections are similarly committed to the IMF policies. Workers

should recall that the SJB criticised the former Rajapakse government for not approaching the IMF earlier. The JVP is now openly saying that in government it would be more effective in implementing IMF-dictated austerity policies.

The SEP calls upon the working class to mount its own independent political struggle against IMF-dictated harsh austerity measures being carried out by the Wickremesinghe government and rally the rural poor to its side.

The SEP outlines the following policies, around which action committees of workers and rural toilers can develop a political fight to defend their social and democratic rights:

- Reject the IMF austerity agenda! No to wage cuts! No to pension cuts!
- Decent wages for all workers indexed to the cost of living! Improve the pension to a decent level to meet high inflation!
- No to starvation and malnutrition! Secure a nutritious diet for all!
- Repudiate all foreign debts! Seize the assets of the super-rich and nationalise the major banks and corporations under workers' control!

The working class needs to reorganise production and distribution under its democratic control to put an end to the hunger and starvation confronting millions and ensure hospitals have medical equipment and medicines. To address the plight of poor farmers, their debts must be cancelled and fertiliser subsidies reintroduced.

Wickremesinghe has threatened to crush any opposition from workers and oppressed masses by declaring an emergency and deploying the military and police. He has already used the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) against anti-government protesters. This week his government extended the Essential Service Act (ESA) covering public sector firms—CEB, Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and Water Supply and Drainage Board—in order to ban strikes.

A struggle by the working class and oppressed masses against austerity will come into direct conflict with the government and the repressive state apparatus. In this situation it is all the more urgent for the working class to campaign for the abolition of executive presidency and repeal of all repressive laws, including the PTA and ESA. The campaign to defend basic

democratic rights of working people is inherently bound up with the struggle for basic social rights.

In a major statement issued on July 20, the SEP has initiated a campaign for the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses to provide the political means for the working class to mobilise its strength, rally the rural poor, and fight for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies. This Congress will be built on the basis of delegates elected from action committees of workers and rural toilers across the island.

The SEP's fight for a workers' and peasants' government is an integral part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. Sri Lankan workers need to forge a unity with their class brothers and sisters around the world in a common struggle against the ruling class onslaught against social and democratic rights of the working class.

The allies of the Sri Lankan working class are workers around the world who are coming into similar attack on their jobs, wages and working conditions. Workers in Sri Lanka should join with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWARFC) initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, which provides means for uniting the struggles of workers at global level.

We call upon workers and youth to join the SEP to build it as the mass revolutionary party of the working class to lead this struggle.



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