

Speech to the December 10 IYSSE anti-war rally

War, social crisis and the tasks of young people in South Asia

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The following are the remarks by Kapila Fernando to the December 10 rally, “For a Mass Movement of Students and Youth to Stop the War in Ukraine!” organized by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

Fernando is the convener of the IYSSE in Sri Lanka. For more information on joining the IYSSE, visit iysse.com.

The catastrophic conditions confronting workers due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine are felt particularly acutely in Sri Lanka, India and Asia as a whole.

The working class, rural toilers and young people in the broader Asian region are experiencing unprecedented levels of poverty and unemployment, as governments impose harsh austerity measures to unload the full burden of the economic crisis upon them.

Sri Lanka and Afghanistan are among the countries reporting the highest inflation and poverty in the world, with the prices of food rising more than 100 percent this year.

According to the World Bank, unemployment for youth aged 15-24 is 24.1 percent in South Asia. In India, it is a staggering 28.3 percent, while in Sri Lanka it is more than 26 percent. Ten-year-old children in South Asia who are in “learning poverty”—that is, unable to read and understand a simple text—has increased from 60 percent before the pandemic to 78 percent today.

Workers in South Asia and the Asia-Pacific region are also being dragged into the maelstrom of imperialist war, which threatens the entire world with nuclear annihilation.

Even as it escalates its war against Russia in Ukraine, the US, with the collaboration of its NATO allies, is intensifying its war preparations against China.

The main allies of the US in the Asia-Pacific—Japan, Australia and India—have fully lined up with the campaign against China, participating in the “Quad,” a quasi-military alliance targeting China.

The latest edition of “Malabar Exercises,” which were started in 1992 as a bilateral war game involving the US and India, were conducted in the East China Sea between November 8 to 15, involving all members of the “Quad.”

Under the government of the fascistic prime minister, Narendra Modi, India has been transformed into a front-line state of the US war drive against China. Following its participation in the “Malabar Exercises,” India held its annual military games with the US known as “Yudh Abhyas” from November 15 to December 1.

The war games were held in a high-altitude area just 100 km from the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the disputed border between India and China, along which both countries have been in a military standoff since May 2020.

The Indian Ocean, with its major sea routes, crucial for China’s imports and exports, is increasingly becoming a battleground between Washington and Beijing.

The whole experience of the more than seven decades of so-called “independence” of South Asia has powerfully vindicated the Theory of Permanent Revolution elaborated by Leon Trotsky, the co-leader alongside Lenin of the October 1917 Russian Revolution.

As Trotsky explained, the national bourgeoisie in

countries of belated capitalist development is incapable of securing the basic social and democratic rights of the people. Only the working class, rallying behind it other oppressed masses, particularly the poor peasantry, is able to ensure the social and democratic rights of the masses through socialist revolution, by taking power into its own hands.

Until the late 1940s, most of the Asian continent was under centuries-long colonial rule. What has so-called independence from colonial rule, within the framework of capitalism and imperialism, brought to billions of workers, youths and rural toilers in these countries? Nothing but poverty, unemployment, civil wars through the whipping up of communalist divisions, the suppression of democratic rights, and now the growing danger of nuclear war.

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But the working class is beginning to fight. Over the past year, Sri Lanka was convulsed by a massive popular uprising of workers, youths and rural toilers against the government of former President Gotabaya Rajapakse.

Workers have been driven into struggle over unbearable conditions, including scarcity and skyrocketing prices of essential items like food, fuel and medicine, along with hours-long daily power cuts since early April. The social crisis in Sri Lanka was profoundly exacerbated by the pandemic and then the war in Ukraine.

The working class played a critical role in the uprisings this year, participating in their millions in general strikes on April 28 and May 6. Rajapakse was forced to flee the country and resign in mid-July by this powerful popular movement, in which workers united across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communal lines that have been promoted by all sections of the ruling elite.

The Socialist Equality Party and the IYSSE in Sri Lanka powerfully intervened in this popular uprising, fighting to mobilize the working class independently, on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program and perspective against all the parties of the bourgeois political establishment. These include the so-called opposition parties like Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and their pseudo-left hangers-on like Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and trade union agents.

Although the popular uprising forced Rajapakse to step down from power, none of the burning issues that led to mass protests have been solved. The new government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who was installed by a widely discredited parliament, continues to unleash massive assaults on the social and democratic rights of the working people and rural masses, mainly by implementing IMF-dictated austerity measures.

Despite the Wickremesinghe government's claims about "not being involved" in great power conflict in the Indian Ocean, given his long-standing position as an open and trusted US-stooge and the increased pressure from Washington and New Delhi, he is lining up behind the US war drive against China.

In the same way, the ruling class throughout South Asia is carrying out harsh austerity measures to unload the burden of the economic crisis on working people and rural toilers.

We call on workers and youth in South Asia, including India and Sri Lanka, to join with the SEP and IYSSE in building an international movement, led by the working class and based on an international socialist program, against nuclear war and the austerity policies carried out by governments around the world.



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