

Sri Lankan workers require a socialist strategy to fight Wickremesinghe's class-war policies

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President Ranil Wickremesinghe reiterated his class-war policies in the Sri Lankan parliament last Wednesday, making clear that his government will relentlessly implement the International Monetary Fund's austerity demands. He challenged the opposition parties to declare if they had another alternative.

Attempting to distance themselves from the government, the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power and dissidents from the ruling Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna (SLPP) walked out before the president's address. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) was the only prominent opposition party that stayed.

None of these parties, however, has an alternative to the IMF measures. Their differences with the Wickremesinghe government are purely tactical.

"Remember, I'm not here to be popular... I'm ready to make unpopular decisions for the sake of the nation," Wickremesinghe told the parliament. In a direct attempt to intimidate the working class, rural poor and other mass opponents of his austerity measures, he declared, "No one has the right to create anarchy in Sri Lanka...We are all bound to protect the state of Sri Lanka."

As Wickremesinghe issued this threat, over 50,000 workers were protesting in central Colombo and throughout the country against the government austerity policies. State authorities responded by mobilising the military and the police.

A heavily-armed military contingent was deployed near the Colombo Fort Railway Station, the main protest site, to assist hundreds of policemen, including anti-riot squads and water cannons. Police were also marshalled at other protest locations.

Wickremesinghe categorically declared that there would be no reduction in the new pay-as-you-earn taxes—the main demand of the protesters. The government, he said, is not prepared to lose 163 billion rupees (\$US4.46 billion) obtained from these taxes.

Wickremesinghe's speech not only justified already-imposed IMF demands, but outlined future attacks. These include reducing the fiscal deficit to 4 percent of GDP this year, from 10 percent of GDP in 2022, and delivering a record surplus in the current account by 2025.

These targets will only be achieved through the ruthless scrapping of subsidies and welfare programs to the poor, axing over half a million public sector jobs, privatisation of various state-

owned ventures, income tax rate rises and hiking the value-added-tax on goods and services.

Wickremesinghe told parliament that when he took office last July schools were closed, examinations could not be held, the agriculture and the plantation industries had collapsed without fertiliser, and the tourist industry was in decline. The country faced daily power cuts of up 12 hours and there were drastic shortages of gas and oil, he added.

Measures taken by his government, he insisted, had "gradually reduced the burden" and established "economic stability." These claims are false to the core. There is no "economic stability" in Sri Lanka or indeed internationally.

Wickremesinghe claimed one of his government's achievements was to save \$US500 million in foreign reserves. But this money was "saved" by slashing imports, including urgently needed essentials and medical supplies, and boosting remittances from workers toiling abroad, particularly in the Middle East.

Rather than "reducing the burden," the government has drastically worsened the conditions of life for millions of people with the official inflation rate in January at 54 percent and food inflation at 60 percent. Tens of thousands now face starvation or near starvation.

This social catastrophe is revealed in the December figures from the World Food Program: 38 percent of households in plantation areas are food insecure, 34 percent in rural areas, and 28 percent in urban areas. Thirty percent of Sri Lankan households have insufficient food, with 43 percent consuming limited food portions.

Sri Lanka is one of ten countries in the world with the highest rates of child malnutrition. Totally indifferent to this reality, Wickremesinghe demanded that people had to "change their lifestyle."

Wickremesinghe referred to the economic collapse of Greece in 2008. "Greece was in a serious economic crisis, similar to that of Sri Lanka, and declared bankruptcy. To overcome this crisis, the salaries of public servants were reduced by 50 percent... It took 13 years to emerge from bankruptcy and repay their debts," he said.

Wickremesinghe's reference to Greece indicates what's next on the government's agenda—large-scale public sector job destruction along with sharp cuts in salaries and pensions. The social

onslaught against the Greek working class ordered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union was imposed by the pseudo-left Syriza government backed by the trade unions.

Wickremesinghe, who failed to mention the mass poverty, youth unemployment and inflation still running rampant in Greece, has appealed to all parliamentary parties, trade unions and other organisations to join hands with his government and impose the IMF measures.

Wickremesinghe called for the economic reform of state-owned enterprises, claiming they lost 800 billion rupees last year. Privatising these institutions, he said, would relieve the burden “borne by the people.” In fact, these ventures will be sold for a song to foreign and local profit-hungry investors, who will retrench tens of thousands of workers, adding to unemployment and poverty.

The president also announced the establishment of a presidential commission to investigate all political parties. This is a political instrument for direct state intervention against his political opponents, particularly working-class parties and organisations. He also said there would be state intervention, via a “self-regulated” system, for the media industry, including cyberspace. The working class must oppose all anti-democratic measures.

Referring to Sri Lanka’s provincial councils, Wickremesinghe said, “We expect to devolve power within a Unitary State”—a reference to the 13th amendment to the constitution. The Tamil parties want the North and East provincial councils to have power-sharing arrangements with Colombo, including land control and police powers, under this amendment.

Successive Sri Lankan governments and Sinhala chauvinist groups have opposed the granting of these powers, claiming that Tamil-controlled provincial councils will use this for separatist purposes.

Wickremesinghe has held all-party conferences and separate talks with the Tamil parties, particularly the TNA. These negotiations are an attempt to work out a deal with the Tamil bourgeoisie, including sections of its upper-middle class, to prop up his fragile government and push through the austerity measures. The power-sharing arrangements have nothing to do with securing the democratic rights of Tamil workers and the poor.

While the president was delivering his policy speech, hundreds of Buddhist monks gathered near parliament where they burnt the 13th amendment. Chief prelates of various Buddhist sects previously voiced their opposition.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite since 1948 has a long history of using anti-Tamil discrimination to divide the working class along ethnic lines. In 1983, it provoked a 26-year communal war that killed hundreds of thousands of Tamils and was used to suppress working-class struggles.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers to oppose the attempt by chauvinist groups to whip up Sinhala chauvinism, or Tamil communalism, and fight for the internationalist unity of working class across ethnic lines to fight the government’s attacks on social and democratic rights.

While opposition parties, such as the SJB and the JVP, are

attempting to come to power by exploiting the growing mass anger against the government, they are totally committed to the IMF’s policies.

As the same time, the trade unions are doing everything possible to limit the rising tide of workers’ strikes and protests and prevent a direct political confrontation with the ruling elite and the capitalist system.

In order to fight for their social rights, workers need to build their own action committees, independent of the trade unions and all the capitalist parties.

In opposition to the IMF’s drastic austerity dictates, the SEP has advanced a series of policies to address the pressing needs of all working people. These include:

- Working-class control of the production and distribution of all essential items;
- Nationalisation of the banks, major corporations and plantations under democratic public control;
- Seizure of the colossal wealth of the billionaires and corporations, and the repudiation of all foreign debts;
- Abolition of the autocratic executive presidency, repeal of all repressive laws, including essential services and anti-terrorism laws, and the release of all political prisoners.

The ally of Sri Lankan workers class in this struggle is the international working class, which fights in country after country against rising inflation, job and wage cuts. These struggles are intensifying as the economic crisis deepens with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the US and NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

In opposition to the Wickremesinghe government and any future capitalist government, the SEP calls for a “Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses” based on delegates elected by action committees, as the means to discuss and initiate a unified struggle for all social and democratic rights. Such a fight paves the way for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies, as part of the struggle for international socialism.

The SEP is fielding candidates in the local council elections for Kolonnawa Urban Council in Colombo district, and Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in Nuwara Eliya district in the central plantations. We urge workers, the poor and youth to study our program, vote for our candidates and join our party.



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