

Oppose the Sri Lankan government's moves to block local elections! Mobilise the working class to defend democratic rights!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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The Sri Lankan government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe has taken deliberate steps to block local government (LG) polls scheduled for March 9. This is a major attack on the basic democratic right of working people to exercise their voting rights.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the anti-democratic actions of the Wickremesinghe regime. It is part of broader attacks on democratic rights in preparation for suppressing opposition to the government's savage austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

We call on workers to mobilise to defend democratic and social rights, by building action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods independent of all capitalist parties and the treacherous trade unions. The latest government moves demonstrate the urgency of this task.

In an address to a Rotary Club district conference in Colombo on Saturday, President Wickremesinghe did not mince his words about his dictatorial aims. "This year, my first priority is economic recovery... without public order there can't be economic recovery," he declared.

The president bluntly warned that he would not "allow the country to go down [the road to] anarchy." He said that the country would be able to decide its future next year, with the use of the ballot, but only after economic recovery.

The message is clear: under the Wickremesinghe regime there will be no "functioning democracy." His claims that he will allow elections next year are a fraud as he riding roughshod over democratic rights now, and will do so again in the future if he deems it necessary.

Under Wickremesinghe's instructions, the state treasury has refused to issue the necessary funds for the election commission to hold local government polls. He ordered

Treasury Secretary Mahinda Siriwardana on February 8 to "only provide provisions for essential government expenses." Local government elections were excluded from the list of essential expenses.

Yesterday the Election Commission informed the Supreme Court that it could not hold the election on the date set due to the lack of funds. Already there is a case in the Supreme Court filed by a pro-government army colonel call for a halt to the local government elections.

Wickremesinghe and the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)-led coalition face almost certain defeat in any election. According to a survey by Verite Research, a Sri Lankan think tank, the government's approval ratings have sunk to 10 percent.

Though the local council election would not change the national government, the Wickremesinghe regime is concerned that an election defeat could lead to further political instability, derail its deeply unpopular economic program and jeopardise talks with the IMF for a \$US2.9 billion bailout loan.

When Wickremesinghe speaks of the road to "economic recovery," he means ruthless austerity: massive cuts to public expenditure by privatising state-owned enterprises, increasing taxes, destroying thousands of public sector jobs, and slashing wages and social subsidies.

Last Friday, the government increased electricity tariffs by 66 percent on top of last year's increase of 75 percent. This measure will mean hundreds of thousands of families in rural and urban areas will be unable to afford electricity.

The government's response to any opposition is repression. Yesterday, police and soldiers were mobilised to disperse a demonstration using water cannon and tear gas called by the main opposition party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) in Colombo demanding local elections

be held. Police also attacked a similar protest by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its National People's Power (NPP) in Kurunegala.

The SEP unequivocally condemns these police attacks. However, we warn workers and the poor not to rely on these bourgeois parties to defend their democratic rights. Neither the SJB nor the JVP have any fundamental differences with the Wickremesinghe government over implementing the IMF austerity policies. Their only concern is that the discredited regime will not be able to contain the rising opposition of working people. They are offering themselves to the ruling class as the alternative to carry out the same agenda.

Amidst growing anger among workers, the trade unions have been compelled to call a protest on Wednesday opposing the sharp tax hikes—the second in two weeks. Tens of thousands of workers from the Colombo port, petroleum and electricity sectors, banks and water supply as well as doctors and engineers will participate.

In a clear sign of massive opposition among working people to the rapid deterioration of their living conditions, the trade unions have declared they will call a general strike from March 1, if the government does not heed their demands.

The SEP warns the working class that the unions are calling these protests and strikes not to wage a struggle against the government, but to block the emergence of an independent movement of workers and rural toilers that threatens bourgeois rule. They promote the illusion that the government can be pressured to make concessions when Wickremesinghe has emphatically declared to the Rotary Club that there will be none.

These unions are all controlled by the capitalist parties—the ruling SLPP, opposition SJB and JVP—that are committed to the IMF austerity agenda. They betrayed the mass popular upsurge in April and May last year, deliberately limiting and calling off strike action in which millions took part—opening the door for the undemocratic installation of Wickremesinghe after President Gotabaya Rajapakse fled the country.

There is no solution for the working class within the capitalist system. The unprecedented economic turmoil in Sri Lanka is a result of the deepening global crisis, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. The response of ruling classes around the world is to impose the burden on working people through austerity and the resort to anti-democratic methods to suppress opposition.

The SEP insists that the fight to defend democratic

rights is bound up with the struggle to overthrow the profit system and implement socialist measures. We call for the urgent building of action committees of workers and rural toilers independent of the trade unions and capitalist political parties to fight for the following demands:

- 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!
- Decent, well-paid jobs for all with safe working conditions! Index wages to the cost of living!
- Cancel the debts of small farmers and assist them with subsidies and guaranteed prices for their produce.

The SEP is calling for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates from action committees throughout the island to discuss and formulate a political strategy to fight for the pressing needs of working people.

The working class and rural poor can only defeat the threat of dictatorship and end the present social calamity by fighting to put an end to the bankrupt profit system and establishing their own workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. The allies of Sri Lankan workers are their class brothers and sisters throughout South Asia and internationally in a unified fight for socialism.

We urge workers, youth and rural toilers join the SEP to build it as the mass revolutionary party needed to lead this political struggle.



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