

Sri Jayawardenepura university students respond enthusiastically to SEP lecture

Our correspondents
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Early this month the Socialist Equality Party–Sri Lanka (SEP) delivered a lecture at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura, near Colombo. The event was sponsored by the Political Science Student Association at the university’s Department of Political Science.

Titled “The Popular Struggle and Marxism,” the lecture was given by SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena and attended by over 75 students and several lecturers.

Wijesiriwardena’s address focused on the mass movement that erupted in April–July last year, demanding the resignation of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, an end to hyperinflation, shortages of essentials, and long hours of power cuts.

The popular uprising, which involved millions of workers and the poor, was betrayed by the trade unions and various pseudo-left groups, including the Frontline Socialist Party. This paved the way for the widely-discredited United National Party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to become president via an anti-democratic parliament vote. Wickremesinghe, who is imposing the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund, now faces a new wave of working-class struggles. University students and workers involved in this anti-government uprising are keen to understand how this struggle was betrayed and another right-wing Sri Lankan government able to come to power, continuing the same disastrous policies.

Prior to the University of Sri Jayawardenepura lecture, International Youth and Student for Social Equality (IYSSE) members held discussions with students explaining the history of the SEP and the Trotskyist movement. Several were particularly interested in understanding Leon Trotsky’s leadership role with Lenin in the Russian Revolution. Some said it would be the first Marxist lecture they had heard.

Introducing Wijesiriwardena, senior lecturer Nishantha Hettiarachchi said: “Even though there are a number of movements in Sri Lanka that falsely claim to be Marxist, there is no movement more suitable to talk about this topic than the SEP, which is committed to the defence of

Marxism.”

Wijesiriwardena began his lecture by explaining that the unprecedented economic crisis in Sri Lanka, and the mass movement that erupted against the Rajapakse government, could only be understood within the context of the global crisis of the capitalist system.

“The capitalist system today,” he said, “has nothing to offer the world’s population but the loss of life from pandemics, growing inequality and social misery and the danger of annihilation in a nuclear third world war.” Wijesiriwardena referred in particular to the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The Rajapakse government, the speaker explained responded to a sharp fall in foreign reserves, debt repayments, collapsing exports, tourism and falling remittances, by slashing imports, including food, medicines, cooking gas and fuel, and then imposed power cuts. The popular opposition emerged in response to these attacks and saw millions take to the streets demanding the president resign.

On April 7, the SEP issued a statement declaring “Gota has got to go!” and posing the question: “But what is to replace him? It is not enough to demand Rajapakse’s removal. He is only the present-day ugly face of a corrupt and reactionary presidential state system that is organised to secure the wealth and interests of the capitalist class and perpetuate the exploitation and impoverishment of the workers and peasants throughout the island.”

Quoting the statement, Wijesiriwardena said the SEP called for “the immediate abolition of the executive presidency with its sweeping autocratic powers, and the other anti-democratic laws, like the Essential Public Service Act which has been used to criminalise strikes by public sector workers, the Public Security Act, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act.”

These essential democratic political changes, the speaker explained, could only be achieved through a determined independent struggle of the working class, the rural poor and the youth for a fundamental restructuring of the economy

along socialist lines.

Elaborating on this program, Wijesiriwardena said that the workers needed to develop an independent network of rank-and-file committees and win the support of the rural poor and other oppressed sections. This struggle, he continued, had to be based on the fight to establish a workers' and peasants' government that would implement socialist policies.

Instead of this perspective, the speaker continued, the reactionary slogan of "no party politics" was imposed on the popular struggle by the trade unions, the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and its Inter University Student Federation, and other middle-class groups.

Based on the opposition of these tendencies to any independent mobilisation of the working class, the mass movement was diverted into support for the demands of Samagi Jana Balavegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna for an interim government under President Rajapakse. Rajapakse fled the country and then resigned, and his government collapsed, which opened the way for Wickremesinghe to come to power.

Wijesiriwardena outlined the nationwide political struggle now being waged by the SEP for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates elected by action committees of workers and rural poor. This, he said, will pave the way for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

Concluding his lecture, Wijesiriwardena invited the students to build an IYSSE branch at the university as part of the struggle to fight austerity measures being imposed by the Wickremesinghe government and for a mass movement of youth and students to stop the war in Ukraine as advocated by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

During the extended question and answer session, one student asked why the popular struggle had only lasted until Rajapakse was overthrown. How will the new struggles erupting against Wickremesinghe be taken forward, the student asked.

Wijesiriwardena explained that the popular struggle had been set back by the absence of revolutionary perspective and leadership. Those groups promoting the slogan "no party politics," he said, prevented the development of an independent working class program, which ensured that the struggle was subordinated to the capitalist parties.

"Struggles cannot be won without correct Marxist political leaderships," the speaker explained and outlined the Bolshevik Party's role during the 1917 Russian Revolution. The victory of the Russian Revolution was the outcome of the protracted political fight of the Bolshevik Party to bring socialist consciousness to the working class and prepare it to for revolutionary tasks, he said. Recalling the lessons of the

Egyptian revolution in 2011, he further explained how that mass uprising, which was not led by a revolutionary party, had ended in defeat.

Another student suggested that the SEP's call for the repudiation of foreign debt was not practically possible and asked for further clarification.

Wijesiriwardena said that the repudiation of foreign debt by a workers' government in one country would require the support of the international working class, particularly in the advanced countries, to combat the reaction of international capital. He emphasised the political importance of the ICFI's fight for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and said the upsurge of the international class struggle had created the conditions for building this movement.

A Social Science Department lecturer asked whether the present-day working class still fell within Marx's classical definition. Wijesiriwardena said that although the forms of employment had changed, the fact that capitalists accumulate profit through the expropriation of surplus value from workers' labour still remained, as Marx had explained.

Capitalist theoreticians, including various postmodernists, claim Marx's interpretation of the working class is outdated and does not apply today. This is false and is designed to create confusion among workers and youth to distance them from Marxism.

Another student asked about the necessary conditions for the practical implementation of the program presented by ICFI.

The speaker drew attention to the growing class struggles internationally, explaining that workers were not ready to tolerate the escalating social attacks of the capitalist ruling class.

The objective conditions are developing for a vast social transformation internationally if this rising working-class militancy is given a revolutionary leadership and perspective, Wijesiriwardena said. "The very contradictions of the capitalist system that are leading to war and social inequality are preparing the conditions for world socialist revolution," he said.

Following the lecture, a number of students and lecturers remained behind to continue the discussion with IYSSE members and to purchase literature. Many students gave their contact details, expressing their interest in joining the IYSSE.



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