

Support the strike against government austerity! Withdraw draconian essential service orders! Fight for a socialist program to defend workers' social and democratic rights!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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The following statement was distributed in the thousands by Socialist Equality Party members and supporters to workers participating in the Wednesday, March 1, mass strike against the government's imposition of IMF-dictated austerity and its autocratic cancellation of the March 9 island-wide local elections.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) stands with the hundreds of thousands of workers on strike today against the brutal austerity program implemented by President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government under the orders of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its sweeping attacks on democratic rights.

Around half a million workers, including in the petroleum, electricity, water supply, health and banking sectors, are participating in today's strike. In addition, hundreds of thousands of teachers and employees of government and semi-government institutions are protesting by picketing during their lunch break and wearing black ribbons.

Amid soaring inflation of over 50 percent, sharp tax hikes, unbearable electricity bill increases, and the collapse of health services, hundreds of thousands of workers and the rural poor are facing starvation and malnourishment.

The simmering anger of workers over these conditions has forced the unions to call today's limited protest actions. The demands presented today include a reduction of the tax burden, the provision of a monthly allowance of 20,000 rupees (\$55) as compensation for inflation, and a reduction of high interest rates.

After today's strikes and protests were announced, Wickremesinghe responded by preparing a brutal crackdown. On Monday night, he issued a government decree proclaiming port services, and transport services including bus, rail and air travel as part of the Essential Public Services Act (EPSA). The President declared that the health, petroleum, and electricity sectors were essential services several months ago.

Under the EPSA, strikes are criminalized. Workers charged with not attending work can be convicted "after summary trial before a Magistrate," and are "liable to rigorous imprisonment" of two to five years and/or a fine of between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees. The movable and immoveable property of anyone convicted can be seized by the state and his or her name "removed from any professional or

vocational register." It is also an offence for an individual to "incite, induce or encourage any other person" to refrain from work. Anyone accused of this crime faces similar punishments.

Make no mistake! Wickremesinghe is intensifying the class war. He maneuvered for weeks to prevent local government elections from going ahead, before finally declaring last week that he would not allow them to proceed, robbing the people of their voting rights. The government, which has repeatedly deployed heavily armed police against workers' protests, mobilized them again on Sunday to conduct a brutal attack on a protest organized by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). One person died as a result.

When former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse fled the country amid last year's mass uprising and resigned, Wickremesinghe was installed as president in a conspiracy of the ruling class. Violating the constitution, Wickremesinghe is ruthlessly employing his arbitrary executive powers to take away the rights of the working class and the poor.

Having used the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) to indefinitely detain without charge some of the organizers of last year's protests, Wickremesinghe is now undoubtedly contemplating the imposition of draconian emergency regulations. The government has gone on the offensive by deploying armed police and military to repress every struggle.

Objective conditions have emerged in which the working class directly confronts the power of the capitalist state. In opposition to the ruling class's reactionary moves, the working class must organize their own independent struggle for a counteroffensive, rallying behind them the rural poor.

The SEP demands the immediate abolition of the Executive Presidency, which is armed with brutal dictatorial powers to suppress workers and the poor.

The SEP also insists that the Essential Public Service Act, which has been used to criminalize strikes by public sector workers, should be withdrawn. We demand that the Public Security Act and the infamous PTA and all other repressive laws be withdrawn.

Wickremesinghe's claims that the government will achieve "economic recovery" by implementing savage IMF austerity and will reduce the burdens on the public at some unspecified future

point are all lies. The austerity program includes high taxes, skyrocketing prices for basic necessities, an increase of electricity tariffs, privatization, the slashing of what remains of free health care and education, and cutting public sector jobs in half.

The government has been ordered by the IMF to eliminate the fiscal deficit, which stood at 10 percent of GDP last year, and show a surplus in next year's budget. The dictatorship of the IMF and international finance capital operates in Sri Lanka. Wickremesinghe last week said that fifteen IMF dictates have already been implemented.

The working class and the poor are being fleeced to repay the debts of international capital. The Sri Lankan cabinet last week ordered attacks on the masses to repay debt instalments and interests to the tune of \$2.6 billion this year.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis is part of the global capitalist crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war against Russia led by the United States and the European imperialist powers have exacerbated the crisis in Sri Lanka as in every country.

The working class must forge its own methods of struggle against this savage austerity program. The trade unions that have called the strikes and protests today, despite vowing to call a general strike in the future if their demands are not met, are in fact working to limit the protests and divide the workers.

The Trade Union Coordinating Center (TUCC), led by the JVP, is participating in the strike. A number of unions including the JVP's Inter-Company Employees Union (ICEU) and Health Professionals Union Collective are included under the TUCC. Vasantha Samarasinghe, the leader of the ICEU, is one of the JVP's main leaders. He said that the IMF austerity program is unbearable for the masses and should be withdrawn. This is a hollow threat to cultivate the illusion that the government can be pressured to cave in.

These unions are posturing as opponents of the IMF's cuts because of the growing opposition among workers. The JVP, along with its front organization, the National People's Power, is calling for a general election to get a "mandate" from the people to implement the austerity program.

Some of the profession-based unions will join today's strike. Their only demand is that the heavy income tax burden be reduced. Last week, leaders of these unions met the President and begged for relief. The President flatly rejected their appeal. Last year, these unions urged the previous Rajapakse regime to approach the IMF to solve the country's economic crisis.

Samarasinghe recalled the one-day general strikes amid last year's mass uprising as a warning to Wickremesinghe. The truth is that these unions betrayed the strikes of millions of workers by diverting their struggle to support the demand put forward by the capitalist Samagi Jana Balawegaya (the principal opposition party) and the JVP for an interim capitalist government. The pseudo-left groups including the Frontline Socialist Party fully supported this campaign. Wickremesinghe was able to come to power because of this betrayal.

The trade unions and pseudo-left groups are tied to the capitalist system, its parties and the state, and are hostile to the independent mobilization of the working class against the government and employers' attacks on social and democratic rights.

Workers should take the struggle for their social and democratic rights into their own hands. The SEP urges workers to form their own action committees independent of all capitalist parties and trade unions in every workplace, factory, plantation and neighborhood. Similar steps to build such committees should be taken by the rural

poor.

The SEP is fighting for an independent political movement of the working class, supported by the rural masses. The action committees should facilitate this mobilization around basic demands addressing the social and democratic rights of the workers, youth and rural poor. We propose the following demands.

- * No to the IMF austerity program!

- * Stop privatization!

- * No cuts to jobs, wages and pensions!

- * Withdraw high income taxes imposed on workers and professionals!

- * Withdraw tariff increases for electricity, water and other services!

- * Provide living wages with jobs for all, and index salaries to the rising cost of living!

- * Establish production and distribution of essential goods for people's lives and the provision of other services under the democratic control of the workers!

- * Nationalize large industries, estates, and financial institutions, including the banks and other centers of the economy, under the control of the working class!

- * Seize the wealth accumulated by billionaires and corporations!

- * Repudiate the foreign debt! The money should instead be used to provide essential fuel, medicine and other medical equipment, and food and drink so people can live!

The workers and poor cannot achieve these demands within the capitalist system.

The call for the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Toilers launched by the SEP amid the anti-government popular uprising last year has become even more urgent to wage a counteroffensive against the Wickremesinghe government's class war agenda.

This Congress should be comprised of democratically elected representatives from the action committees of workers and rural toilers throughout the country. The Congress will decide the course of action to fight for the demands outlined above. Thus, it will lay the foundation for a worker-peasant government committed to a socialist program.

This is part of a broader international struggle for socialism that must be carried out by building the unity of the Sri Lankan working class with workers in South Asia and globally. The objective conditions for the international unification of the working class have emerged with the growing struggles by workers across the world, including in the United States, Europe and South Asia, against attacks by governments and employers.

The SEP calls on workers, youth, the rural poor and professionals to join this struggle. Participate in our public online rally on Sunday, March 5 at 4 p.m. as a first step to doing so. Register for the meeting through this link.



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