

Sri Lanka: Kolonnawa residents denounce government's IMF-dictated austerity

Our reporters
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Last weekend Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters campaigned in Kolonnawa, a Colombo outer suburb, for the party's scheduled April 3 public meeting. The open-air event is titled "Oppose Sri Lankan president's suppression of local elections! Mobilise the working class to defend democratic and social rights!"

The SEP has fielded 53 candidates in three local government bodies—the Kolonnawa Urban Council in Colombo, Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in Nuwaraeliya and the Karainagar Pradeshiya Sabha in Jaffna. Sri Lanka's previously scheduled March 9 local government elections were cancelled by President Wickremesinghe. They have been postponed until April 25.

Campaigners spoke with residents at Sanhida Sevana, an 11-storey apartment block housing about 200 families. They also discussed with workers at the Kolonnawa Junction. Many of the apartment residents work at small private companies and hotels, others are daily wage workers at the nearby vegetable and fish market, and some women are employed as domestic servants. Many of the youth at the apartments were unemployed.

Most of those spoken with denounced the Wickremesinghe government's social attacks and how they had devastated their lives. The government has imposed a series of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures as a pre-condition for a \$2.9 billion bailout loan. Many said that they didn't trust any of the parliamentary political parties.

Campaigners widely distributed party statements, including, "Oppose president's suppression of local elections! Mobilise the working class to defend democratic and social rights!", and "For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses in

Sri Lanka!"

A mother of three children said she does housework for a monthly income of just 30,000 rupees (\$US91). "This amount is not enough for expenses, such as food and school fees. Our house rent is 5,600 rupees and the monthly electricity bill has increased to 3,750 rupees up from 1,800 rupees. The water bill has gone from 700 to 1,200 rupees," she said.

"Last year March, I was able to survive on 30,000 rupees a month but now we cannot even live on 60,000 rupees. I'm struggling with three school-going children because the school [facilities and service] fees were increased on March 27 to 4,500 rupees, up from 2,536 rupees last year. This means I have to spend 13,500 rupees for the three of them. I've not yet been able to buy [stationery] books for my children. For the smallest son alone, it will cost 6,000 rupees and the new school session is beginning tomorrow [Monday]," she added.

Several families in the apartment block, she continued, had to stop sending their children to school. "There are some children here who have left school because their parents cannot afford to buy the books. I know of three families who face this situation."

Condemning all Sri Lanka's parliamentary parties, she said: "It doesn't matter which party comes to power, they will say we have taken out loans and so we must pay back these loans. The IMF loan does not benefit the poor, it will only benefit them [the politicians] and they will sell [privatise] whatever is possible and belongs to the people."

Campaigners explained the SEP's call for workers and rural poor to form action committees at every factory, workplace, plantation, neighbourhood and in the rural areas, independent of the unions and the bourgeois parties. They also discussed the party's campaign to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress

of Workers and Rural Masses, to mobilise workers and rally the rural poor to fight for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies.

Responding to this explanation, the mother of three said: “If we, as workers, can unite, then this program can be achieved. Otherwise, if the situation continues as it is, there will be no future for our children. I’ve not heard any other party explain what you have done today.”

SEP campaigners spoke with a young worker who is married with one child. He works six days a week for a delivery service company but only earns about 60,000 rupees per month. He denounced the government, saying: “What I earn is not enough now. Our electricity bill has tripled, and people are starving. The IMF loan has not benefited us—we will have to pay it—but the politicians use it to solve their own problems. We are ultimately indebted, but every politician has enriched themselves.”

Referring to last year’s mass uprising that ousted former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, he denounced the Wickremesinghe government and its repression of those involved in the mass movement.

“Those who have robbed the country live comfortably,” he said, “but the youth who took up the struggle last year are being witch-hunted. What they did was right, they fought for us. Wickremesinghe came to power without any mandate, and those in parliament who were against us, elected him. All the politicians are friends.”

Sameera, a young single man spoke with campaigners. Having previously worked as a construction worker, he lost his job after the building industry went into crisis. He now sells vegetables for a living. “There is a big competition in this trade, and sometimes I have to bear losses, he said. “The existing political system should change, otherwise none of us will have a future.”

A young worker employed as a cook at a five-star hotel in Colombo said: “Though the government boasts that the tourism industry has recovered, this industry can be swept away any time in the next crisis. Previously there were big job losses in the hotel trade, and so we were in a continuous struggle to survive. I’m totally opposed to the existing political system.”

SEP campaigners spoke to a young unmarried man

who earns 1,500 rupees per day at a company that produces school bags. He explained that he had no faith in any political party. Commenting on the government’s cancellation of the March 9 local elections, he said: “People don’t vote for the government and even though the election is going to be held nothing will change.”

A young student and her mother criticised government cuts to education and health while funds for defense were being increased. The rulers are concerned with their own protection, the student said, because they fear the people who know how politicians work. “When struggles develop, the politicians are only concerned about their own protection, not the protection of the people.”



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