

SEP and IYSSE hold successful public meeting against Sri Lankan government's cancellation of local elections

Our correspondents

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful open-air public meeting at Kolonnawa, a Colombo outer suburb, on April 3.

Titled “Oppose the President’s suppression of local government elections! Mobilise the working class to defend democratic and social rights!” the event attracted workers, young people and urban poor from the area. It was also broadcast live, via the party’s Facebook page, and has been viewed by 1,200 people so far.

Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe has undemocratically intervened to cancel scheduled local government elections in response to rising popular opposition to his ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) government. Although the local elections have no direct bearing on the continued existence of his presidency or government, Wickremesinghe is nervous about the broader social impact of a probable defeat of his political allies.

SEP Political Committee member W.A. Sunil, who chaired the meeting, said postponement of the local government elections was an unconstitutional act and a violation of the basic democratic rights of all working people. “It is a serious warning to the working class,” he said, detailing Wickremesinghe’s extraordinary and ongoing efforts to block the local polls.

“President Wickremesinghe and his government are desperately trying to postpone the election, fearing that a defeat in the local elections will deepen the political instability in the country, and plunge capitalist rule into further crisis,” he said.

SEP Political Committee member Vilani Peiris, who leads the slate of party candidates contesting for the Kolonnawa Urban Council, reviewed the ongoing anti-democratic attacks by the Wickremesinghe-SLPP regime.

She said the cancellation of the local elections is an integral part of this process.

Peiris said that although last year’s mass action by workers, youth and the rural masses had ousted former President Rajapakse and his government, this movement had been politically derailed by the trade unions and pseudo-left formations, like the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

These organisations, she said, opposed an independent political movement of the working class, diverting it into support for an interim bourgeois government being called for by the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimuthi Peramuna (JVP). This paved the way for the pro-US, long-term International Monetary Fund (IMF) enforcer Ranil Wickremesinghe to come to power.

“From the outset, the SEP was the only organisation providing a critical evaluation of the situation and a revolutionary socialist program for the working class,” she said.

IYSSE convener Kapila Fernando explained the significance of Wickremesinghe’s recent anti-democratic threats against teachers protesting over the government’s arbitrary cancellation of the teachers transfer board.

“The president accuses [striking] teachers of taking students hostage but it’s the government, not teachers, that has forced students to drop out of school because of the skyrocketing prices of food, transport and books,” Fernando said.

Delivering the main speech, SEP general secretary Deepal Jayasekera said the political situation in Sri Lanka was at a decisive turning point, following approval of the IMF’s \$3 billion bailout loan and Wickremesinghe’s intensifying assault on democratic rights.

Jayasekera referred to the government’s deployment of the military in response to recent strike action by

petroleum workers opposing privatisation. He said: “This is a warning to the entire working class about how the government will react to any strike against IMF austerity.”

Commenting on Wickremesinghe’s moves to replace the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) with an all-encompassing “Anti-Terror Bill,” Jayasekera said: “Successive governments have used the PTA against their political opponents and workers, youth and rural poor to suppress their struggles. But now, with the crisis of bourgeois rule and workers’ struggles entering a higher level, the government sees that the PTA is not enough. It wants an even more draconian and repressive law.”

Under these new measures, he continued, the government could prosecute on terrorism charges anyone criticising or protesting the austerity policies of the Sri Lankan or any other governmental or international organisation, such as the IMF.

“The working class, now coming into struggle in defence of its basic social rights and against the government’s measures, is heading into a direct collision with the Wickremesinghe government. What is now developing in Sri Lanka is a revolutionary conflict between the working class and the bourgeois ruling class. The working class needs to prepare politically, theoretically and organisationally for this confrontation,” Jayasekera said.

Jayasekera pointed out that Sri Lanka’s opposition parliamentary parties, such as the SJB, the JVP and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), have no fundamental differences with the government’s IMF-dictated austerity measures.

The speaker explained that the intensification of the class struggle in Sri Lanka was part of a global phenomenon and referred to intensifying strikes and protests by workers internationally as they came into direct conflict with the repressive state measures of their own governments.

“The SEP is intervening in these sharp political developments with a revolutionary socialist program for the working class, against all the parties of the capitalist political establishment, and their trade union and pseudo-left agents.

“We are continuing our campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, launched by the SEP in mid-July last year during the popular uprising against the former Rajapakse government. We have brought this to the centre of our campaign against the brutal assault by the government on

the social and democratic rights of workers and the oppressed masses,” he said.

The SEP’s call for workers to form their own action committees—at every workplace, factory, plantation and neighbourhood, and among the rural poor, independent of the unions and all the bourgeois parties—was the only way workers can take their struggle into their own hands, Jayasekera said.

He explained that the trade unions and pseudo-left formations, such as the FSP, opposed any independent political movement of the working class against the Wickremesinghe government, repeating the role they played during the mass protests against the Rajapakse regime.

Referring to the “people’s councils” advocated by the FSP, the speaker warned that these organisations were political traps aimed at pressuring bourgeois governments and the parliament for limited reforms. Contrary to this perspective, Jayasekera said the action committees advocated by the SEP were independent, democratically controlled organs of the working class to fight Wickremesinghe’s IMF-dictated social attacks and the capitalist profit system itself.

The Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses (DSC) advocated by the SEP, Jayasekera concluded, “is aimed at developing a mass independent political movement of the working class, rallying rural toilers, to establish a government of workers and peasants.

“And this struggle to build a government of workers and peasants will be a part of the broader struggles for socialism in South Asia and internationally. We urge workers, youth, intellectuals and rural poor to join with the SEP to bring forward this campaign to build the DSC for establishing a government of workers and peasants.”



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