

Sri Lankan police attack rally to mark start of last year's popular uprising

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Sri Lankan police arrested three people and unleashed a violent attack on a March 31 demonstration marking the first anniversary of the anti-government protests that began outside the house of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse in Mirihana and led to a mass movement that forced his resignation.

Security personnel, including 3,000 policemen, were deployed to the area, well before the event. Police attacked the protesters, attempted to grab their placards, and forced them towards the nearby town of Nugegoda.

Police physically attacked and tore the shirt of journalist Shantha Wijesuriya as he was photographing the police violence. Vindana Prasad Karunaratne, a Sirasa TV journalist was also threatened by police.

Anuruddha Bandara, Sudara Jayasinghe and Dhanish Ali, leading figures in last year's Galle Face Green protests, were arrested but released later that night on condition that they take no legal action against the police.

After the police chased away the crowd, protesters congregated at Nugegoda junction, carrying placards and chanting slogans "Don't postpone elections!" and "Hands off the rights of people!"

Notwithstanding the Socialist Equality Party's principled opposition to the pro-capitalist policies of the protest organisers, we strongly condemn the violent government-ordered assault. The Wickremesinghe government is attempting to suppress all popular opposition to its International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity policies.

One year ago on March 31, President Rajapakse ordered a vicious police attack on a protest in the same area. The mass uprising demanding the resignation of Rajapakse and his government erupted and spread nationally in the aftermath of that attack.

Millions of workers called for an end to power cuts

and for adequate supplies of food, medicines, petrol and other essentials and took part in two one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6. Rajapakse ignominiously fled the country on July 13, and then resigned.

Confronted with this mass movement, the ruling elite handed over the task of defending the capitalist state to Ranil Wickremesinghe, a notorious pro-US stooge and International Monetary Fund (IMF) enforcer, making him president.

The Wickremesinghe government, in exchange for the recently announced \$US2.9 billion bailout loan from the IMF, is now implementing a new round of social attacks. Even the IMF has described the agenda as a "brutal experiment."

This is provoking a new round of struggles with workers in telecom, petroleum, education, post, bank, power, ports, water supply and other sectors taking action in recent weeks.

Haunted by last year's mass anti-government uprising, the Wickremesinghe government, backed by the capitalist class, is attacking basic democratic rights, so as to preempt strikes and protests by workers, students and other social layers.

Violating the constitution, the Wickremesinghe government has postponed local government elections, while using the Essential Public Service Act and deploying the military against anti-privatisation protests and strikes by petroleum workers. Last month the government announced a new Anti-Terrorism Bill, which, if adopted, will ban and harshly punish anyone protesting against government policies.

In this situation, it is critical to draw the political lessons from last year's popular uprising.

Leading figures in last year's Galle Face Green protests, which politically diverted workers and youth

into support for an interim bourgeois government, are at it again, this time to “pressure” the Wickremesinghe regime.

Those involved in last month’s one-year anniversary protest included, Eranga Gunasekera, national organiser of Socialist Youth Union, which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP); Lahiru Weerasekera, the national organiser of Youth for Change led by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP); and Dhanish Ali and Anuruddha Bandara.

These formations have no fundamental differences with the IMF-dictated austerity measures. The JVP and its National People’s Power (NPP) front are attempting to win political power, claiming they can resurrect Sri Lankan capitalism more effectively than Wickremesinghe. The JVP and its FSP breakaway insist that their “solutions” can be achieved without challenging the parliamentary framework and the profit system.

Addressing the Nugegoda protest on March 31, following the police attack, FSP youth leader Lahiru Weerasekera cynically declared, “We are acting on earlier lessons learnt with [new] experiments” and called for more struggle. The FSP’s perspective is to pressure the government by building alliances with the trade unions and various opposition political parties to form “people’s councils” to win concessions.

While the FSP, JVP and trade union bureaucrats denounce Wickremesinghe’s elevation into the presidency, his austerity measure programs and attacks on democratic rights, they cannot answer one question.

Why, after the mass working-class movement forced the resignation of Rajapakse and his government, was Wickremesinghe able to come to power?

The answer is because these organisations betrayed the mass movement, diverting the mass movement behind the demands of the SJB and JVP for an interim capitalist regime.

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka fought to mobilise the working class independently, as the leadership of the poor and other oppressed layers, on the basis of an international socialist program.

Against the political illusion-mongering of the opposition parties and the pseudo-left, the SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, called for abolition of the executive presidency and the

repressive state apparatus, and for a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to socialist policies.

Based on the political lessons of the popular uprising, the SEP issued a statement on July 20, 2022 calling for a Socialist and Democratic Congress of Workers and Rural Masses as the basis for a political fight against the Wickremesinghe regime and the capitalist class.

We called for the Congress to be based on delegates of action committees of workers and rural toilers, built at every workplace, estate and the countryside. Such committees will only be able to fight for the interests of the workers and the poor if they are politically independent of all the bourgeois parties and the trade union bureaucracies.

Drawing on the political lessons of the betrayal of revolutionary upsurge of the Egyptian working class in 2011, the SEP statement warned: “It [the working class] cannot allow the political initiative to slip from its hands. It needs to tear itself away from all of the political parties of the bourgeoisie, their pseudo-left hangers-on and trade union apparatuses. It must establish its own political instruments to defend its class interests and fight for power.”

The SEP’s call for the building of independent action committees emerges now with added urgency. If power is left in the hands of the bourgeoisie, it will only result in a political catastrophe. The working class cannot fight the Wickremesinghe government’s class war if it remains trapped inside the pro-capitalist trade unions and the pseudo-left.

As the SEP statement insisted, the crucial lesson of last year’s uprising is the building of the SEP as the mass revolutionary party of the working class and rallying of the urban and rural poor against the capitalist profit system.



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