

Tamil nationalists back austerity, police-state measures against Sri Lankan workers

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Last year, a mass uprising of Sri Lankan workers and oppressed masses toppled President Gotabaya Rajapakse. Among workers and rural masses of all ethnic origins, anger is mounting against the regime the bourgeoisie then cobbled together around President Ranil Wickremesinghe. As Wickremesinghe uses the dictatorial powers of the executive presidency to crush workers' militancy, workers are defying "essential service" strike bans and his attempt to replace the infamous Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) by an even more draconian Anti-Terror Bill (ATB).

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP)-Sri Lanka has initiated a struggle to convene a Democratic and Socialist Congress of the Workers and Rural Masses, as an alternative to the reactionary capitalist police-state led by Wickremesinghe. This struggle goes in a diametrically opposite class direction to Sri Lanka's Tamil-nationalist parties, who serve as tools of capitalism and enemies of the people.

On March 30, M.A. Sumanthran, a prominent leader of the Tamil Federal Party (ITAK), joined Wickremesinghe and business leaders for a panel discussion on 'IMF and Beyond'. The event was hosted by Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka and held at the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo. In this meeting, Sumanthran expressed the Tamil nationalists' support for the brutal austerity "reforms" the IMF is negotiating with Wickremesinghe against the working class.

Speaking alongside Wickremesinghe, Sumanthran said, "we discuss openly, transparently, and go together. I also agree with the president. We move forward in that without postponing those reforms as well. We also had discussions regarding how the north and east can contribute towards economic growth, because of the high level of potential there. We will cooperate with the president with regards to realizing this."

The ITAK thus pledged its support for the attacks the IMF demanded in exchange for a four-year, \$US 2.9 billion bailout loan. These include the privatization of state enterprises, the elimination of tens of thousands of public sector jobs, the destruction of essential services in health and education, and a hike on income taxes.

While praising austerity, Sumanthran indicated that he hoped his cooperation with Wickremesinghe would prevent further insurrectionary struggles by the working class. He declared, "I agree with the president, that all of us have to do this together and the discussion must happen here, not on the streets. But if the discussion is not to happen in the streets, then it must happen here."

After nationwide March 15 protests against Wickremesinghe, the Tamil-language newspaper, *Eella Nadu* carried an editorial calling on workers and students in the North not to join. It attacked such working class "countermeasures" as an obstacle to implementing IMF austerity.

It wrote, "Such countermeasures could set back Ranil's moves. If Ranil's moves are to succeed, there will need to be a significant improvement in the economic downturn. For that, the International Monetary Fund's loan should be available indefinitely. But if such insurgent actions are carried out, the economic situation will become more complicated."

Like the Sinhala ruling elite, the Tamil nationalists speak for layers of the bourgeoisie terrified by the growing radicalization in the working class after the toppling of Rajapakse. As workers of all ethnicities oppose the Sri Lankan ruling class, the Tamil nationalists respond by trying to divide the workers along national lines. They are desperate to prevent Tamil workers and rural poor from joining mass struggles of their class brothers and sisters against the capitalist state machine.

This emerges very clearly in their craven support for the regime's extension of the PTA and for Wickremesinghe's new anti-terrorism bill. If adopted as law, the bill would give the president, police, and military extraordinary powers to arrest and detain people without evidence. Anyone found guilty of a "terrorist" offense could be punishable by death, up to 20 years in prison, and a fine of up to 1 million rupees.

The Tamil nationalist parties have reacted to Wickremesinghe's police-state policies by arguing that since the Tamil population suffered from the PTA's

measures in the past, it is legitimate for the Sinhalese population to suffer under such measures now.

Sivajnanam Siritharan, a prominent ITAK member, said: “The Sinhalese people in the south should understand that the Tamil people have been living under the Anti-Terrorism Act since the past, and that law has only now started to attack the Sinhalese.”

Sritharan also claimed that when the Sri Lankan military carried out a mass murder in the north of Tamil civilians and fighters, at the end of the civil war in 2009, the Sinhalese people in the south celebrated with firecrackers, milk, and rice.

The purpose of this provocative and false propaganda is virtually self-evident. Amid growing strikes and struggles by Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers together against Wickremesinghe and his executive presidency, Tamil nationalists are stirring up communal hatreds. They try to direct the outrage at the bloody crimes of Sri Lanka’s executive presidency and unitary state in a reactionary sense: to divide the workers and rural masses and block a united struggle against the attempt to build up this regime into a militarized presidential dictatorship.

Sritharan’s attempt to divide the workers by passing off the PTA as a measure exclusively directed against Tamils is another political fraud based on historical lies.

The Prevention of Terrorism Act was first introduced in 1979 by the UNP (United National Party) regime of President J.R. Jayewardene under the pretext of combating the Tamil militant groups. It was extensively used against Tamils during the 1983-2009 communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But the law was used first to suppress the united struggles of the working class, such as the 1980 Sri Lankan general strike.

When the PTA was brought in 1979, Jayawardena made a behind the scenes deal with the TULF claiming that the PTA would be temporary and not be used against Tamils. On that basis, the TULF allowed it to pass, by abstaining in the parliamentary vote on the PTA.

Even after the communal war began in 1983, the PTA was used against both Sinhalese and Tamils. The UNP employed it to suppress rural unrest in the island’s south between 1988 and 1990, slaughtering tens of thousands of Sinhalese youths. At the time, Wickremesinghe was a minister in the UNP government.

The Tamil nationalists have a long record of offering support to police-state measures, even those used against Tamil people, insofar as they are aimed primarily at the workers and rural masses. Indeed, the Tamil United Liberation Front, which included the Tamil Federal Party, abstained from voting against this cruel law when it was first presented in Parliament in 1979.

Opposing Tamil and Sinhala chauvinism, the SEP fights to mobilize the entire working class and the oppressed masses against Sri Lankan capitalism based on an international socialist perspective. In this, it bases itself on its powerful tradition of fighting to unify Sinhalese and Tamil workers against the communal war and against capitalism.

The most powerful allies of the workers of any nationality are their class brothers and sisters of other nationalities. In recent weeks, workers in countries across the world and particularly in Europe have gone on strikes and participated in protests against austerity and war. In France, amid mass strikes against President Emmanuel Macron’s pension cuts, two-thirds of the population supports a general strike to block the economy and bring down Macron.

The events of Sri Lanka are a classic illustration that the working class cannot struggle to defend democratic rights within the framework of bourgeois politics and the capitalist state. Workers must take their struggles in their own hands. The decisive question is building independent action committees at every workplace and among the rural masses, independent of the union bureaucracies, to unify the working class and mobilize it in political struggle.

The SEP is waging an island-wide campaign among workers and youth for the organization and convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. This provides a political strategy for the working class to consolidate its forces, win the active support of the rural masses, and lay the basis for its own rule through a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to restructuring society on socialist lines.



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