

Enthusiastic response by Sri Lankan workers and students to upcoming international May Day online rally

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka have won a strong response to their campaign for the online international May Day rally. Organised by the International Committee of the Fourth International, (ICFI) the event will be held in the early hours of May 1, local time.

The initial stages of the worsening global economic crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia, were sharply expressed in Sri Lanka in April 2022, when it defaulted on its foreign debts. This produced scarcities, soaring prices of food and other essentials, such as fuel, cooking gas and medicine, and the eruption of a mass movement that ousted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government in July.

Rajapakse's successor, President Ranil Wickremesinghe is now systematically implementing International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures, slashing workers jobs and social conditions, while unleashing state repression to suppress growing working-class opposition.

SEP/IYSSE members spoke with workers and youth about the international and systemic character of these social attacks, and the necessity for the mobilisation of the international working class on a revolutionary socialist program.

A worker from Colombo Port's Supply Division said: "The US started its war initiatives after the Soviet Union was dissolved and divided into several states. Western countries overthrew the pro-Russian government in Ukraine in 2014. If the Ukraine war escalates into a world war, there will be great

destruction. Workers all around the world must stand united against war."

Referring to the impact of the IMF measures on Colombo port workers, he said: "While the trade unions are not fighting for workers' rights, we now see working-class struggles developing all over the world. This means that workers must come forward to build action committees and they must be mobilised to build the international workers' alliance to fight government repression."

SEP members spoke with workers living at railway workshop accommodation quarters in Ratmalana on the outskirts of Colombo. Seven workers registered for the May Day rally.

Thushara, a railway technical worker, was angry over the response of the unions to last year's mass uprising against former President Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe's elevation to the presidency.

"I support the ICFI's call for an international May Day rally, which is the day of international working-class solidarity. Even our eight-hour working day was won through fearless international struggles," he said.

"As you've explained, there are so many motivating factors for the working class to come into struggle. Wickremesinghe's move to have the IMF dictates enacted into law and the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Bill will alarm the workers."

Sajith, a development assistant at the railway department supported the online May Day rally. "It's important to rally workers internationally at the same time," he said. Referring to the IMF measures, he added, "The government attacks are endless. How will we be able to tolerate this? I definitely believe that only the workers can favourably change this situation."

G. Wilfred, a plantation worker from Glenugie Estate, Deeside division in Upcot, said he would participate in the May Day rally. He denounced the claims of the imperialist powers that they were defending the Ukraine people and spoke on the dire impact of rising inflation in Sri Lanka.

“It’s not just Ukrainian people suffering from this war, it is hurting people all over the world. We are severely impacted here and have seen the price of our basic food—wheat flour—as well as fuel and bus fares, skyrocket. It has become unbearable for us and in the coming period, many people could die of starvation,” he said.

Nandana, a non-academic employee from a Chilaw school and a member of the Teachers Parents and Students Action Committee, discussed the government’s austerity measures.

“I have two school-going children and also take care of my parents. High inflation—especially the price of drugs, which are sky high—means that we cannot cover our living expenses, even with the combined salaries of me and my wife.

“I agree that the crisis of capitalism has been deepened because of the war in Ukraine and the global pandemic. The cost of food has gone up on a global scale. As the working class, we must unite internationally to stop a world war, defeat the austerity attacks, and stop global warming.”

Kusum Gamage, a self-employed apparel worker from Galle, said: “I recently worked in an apparel factory in the Koggala Free Trade Zone and experienced how workers’ hardships are worsening. Workers everywhere have been severely affected by the pandemic, war and the economic crisis.

“Yes, this is a world problem. Every worker in these free trade zones can see from their own experience that this cannot be solved just within our country. That’s why we need to organise internationally, and for that the International May Day rally being organised by the ICFI is very important. I will discuss this with other workers.

“I read the May Day statement [written by David North on the WSWS] and am convinced that the working class can prevent a world war, but a powerful movement of the working class must be built for that.”

A Kandy National Hospital nurse voiced her support for the online rally. “Nowadays, May Day is

used as political propaganda by the trade unions and the capitalist parties. In fact, May Day belongs to the workers and it should be a day that brings together workers in struggle in every country,” she said.

M. Suren, a Jaffna University faculty of arts student, registered for the international May Day and said: “I hate this war in Ukraine. Thousands of people are dying but I only learnt about the connection between Sri Lanka’s economic crisis and the Ukraine war in my discussions with you.

“The Ukraine war must be stopped immediately. We’ve had a lot of experience with war disaster because of the war conducted by successive Sri Lankan governments against the Tamils. Moreover, if nuclear weapons are used in Ukraine, human beings will be eliminated from the earth.”

Prabhash, a student at a government-funded institute of higher technology in the North-West province, told IYSSE campaigners that he opposed the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and would register for the rally.

He said hyperinflation was making it impossible to pay for his boarding house accommodation and food. “Because we cannot afford our living expenses, we are now working in a nearby garment factory for a meager allowance. Resources should be allocated not for war but for our primary needs, such as food and education,” he said.

A business administration student from Jayewardenepura University also registered for the rally. “It’s wrong to say that the Ukraine war was unprovoked. It is the result of a long-term plan by American imperialism, supported by the European governments. If this war continues, there’s a possibility that it will turn into a conflict involving nuclear weapons. The war has already caused great destruction to the working class as well as other masses,” he said.

“In the real world, young people don’t have jobs and their future is unimaginably bleak. Discussing these issues on May Day is going to be very meaningful for workers and youth.”



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