

Build an anti-war movement of workers and youth in South Asia

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This is the report delivered by Dilaxshan Mahalingam, a member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka, to the 2023 International May Day Online Rally. To view all speeches, visit wsws.org/mayday.

Dear comrades,

On March 7, the IYSSE in Sri Lanka organized two successful anti-war demonstrations in front of two major universities in the country. One was near Jaffna University, in the war-ravaged Northern Province, and the other was near Peradeniya University in the Central Province.

They were a part of the series of events, including lectures organized by the IYSSE internationally, to explain the origins and implications of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and to elaborate a socialist and internationalist strategy to stop the war, which threatens to evolve into another imperialist world war.

To stop the war, our orientation is to the developing international class struggle. Social attacks against the working class have been greatly intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and Ukraine war. Only by mobilizing this great social force independently can imperialist war be stopped once and for all.

That is the central political task we assign to ourselves in this May Day rally: to fuse the opposition to war with these great class struggles. Based on this strategy, we are building a global anti-war movement of workers, youth and students.

On November 11 last year, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremasinghe addressed the convocation of Kotelawala Defence University, making clear how Sri Lanka is enmeshed in a developing imperialist world war. He said:

In the 1970s, when I became a minister, most

people were not focusing on the Indian Ocean but on the Pacific and the Atlantic. Today it is not so. Today the main competition in the world has gone from US and Russia to the US and China. So, what happens in Russia is only a side show. What happens in this area is far more important.

Wickremesinghe claimed to remain neutral in “the great power rivalry.” However, amid the Ukraine war and US war preparations against China, the whole South Asian region is increasingly being dragged into this developing great power conflict. Given the well-known pro-US record of Wickremesinghe and under increasing pressure from the US, he will most likely line up with Washington against China.

Sri Lanka has been integrated closely with Washington’s war preparations against China over the years, through SOFA and ACSA military agreements, joint military exercises with the US military and regular bilateral meetings with US officials. That is why the IYSSE initiative in the South Asian region is crucial to build an anti-war movement of workers and youths.

Our campaign for building this anti-war movement is inseparably bound up with a political and ideological struggle against various student organizations, including the Tamil nationalist Jaffna University Students Union (JUSU) and Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), who are working to trap students within the bourgeois political framework.

The JUSU is guided by pro-imperialist Tamil nationalist bourgeois parties whose objective is to secure privileges for the Tamil elite through a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government.

The Tamil capitalist parties, including the TNA, are supporting IMF-directed austerity and police-state measures carried out by the Wickremesinghe government.

They are cynically mocking the developing class struggle as a purely Sinhalese affair.

On March 30, MA Sumanthiran, a leading member of TNA, addressed a panel discussion on “IMF and Beyond.” Wickremesinghe and business leaders participated in this discussion. Sumanthiran expressed his enthusiastic readiness to collaborate with Wickremesinghe in implementing IMF-dictated austerity, stating:

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.

This reactionary politics was on full display when JUSU discouraged Tamil students from participating in last year’s April 4 demonstration. The demonstration was organized by Jaffna University students in support of the popular uprising against then-President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

However, Tamil students defied the JUSU directive. They joined in their hundreds in anti-government protests along with Sinhala and Muslim students, demonstrating their desire for unity cutting across reactionary communal lines.

The IUSF is politically guided by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). The FSP was formed in 2012 by a breakaway group from the Sinhala chauvinist JVP. What is this IUSF primarily doing? It limits students to futile protests on various demands aimed at pressuring the government, thus preventing students from turning towards the working class and organizing a workers-led joint struggle against the government and bourgeois rule.

The FSP collaborated with the trade unions in betraying last year’s anti-government mass uprising. It derailed it to support moves by the opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the JVP, to form an interim government, i.e., an alternative bourgeois government.

Now, they are carrying this politics further. They promote “people’s councils” to pressure the government for limited reforms, thus again trapping the working class within the bourgeois political framework.

Both JUSU and IUSF revealed their pro-imperialist

character by supporting last year’s UNHRC session on Sri Lanka. Nuwan Bopage, former convenor of IUSF and a FSP leader, addressed the session in person, complaining about human rights violations by the Wickremesinghe government.

The JUSU co-signed a letter with Tamil capitalist parties to the UNHRC, demanding that the Sri Lankan government be brought before the International Criminal Court, regarding the war crimes committed during the civil war against the LTTE.

Resolutions have been passed in the UNHRC sessions regarding Sri Lanka. These resolutions have nothing to do with any concern about the Tamil people’s democratic rights in Sri Lanka. It is a means for pressuring the government to line up with the US and other western powers’ strategic confrontation with China.

These two organizations sow illusions among youth, students and workers that these imperialist warmongers are champions of democratic rights. In fact, the US and its allies are preparing nuclear annihilation. These same governments do not have any concern for democratic rights. They are suppressing the developing class struggle in their own countries and cultivating right-wing fascist political tendencies.

The IUSF/FSP, losing ground among students due to the IYSSE’s exposure of their reactionary politics, are resorting to thuggery to keep their hold among students who seek an alternative in the IYSSE.

The IUSF-affiliated Sri Jayawardenapura University Student Union physically threatened students who participated in a IYSSE lecture. The lecture held on the campus drew lessons from last year’s mass movement. This threat against students who support the IYSSE is an admission of the IUSF’s pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist politics. They have no answer to the IYSSE’s criticisms.

We urge students to reject the reactionary politics of the JUSU and the IUSF and join with the IYSSE to fight for a future free of capitalist exploitation and imperialist violence. Thank you.



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