

SEP public meeting in Sri Lanka discusses how to fight Wickremesinghe's privatisation measures

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a powerful public meeting on July 6 to discuss the political strategy needed to fight the International Monetary Fund-dictated privatisation measures being implemented by the government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Held at the Colombo Public Library Auditorium, it was attended by over 100 people, including workers from the ports, health, railways, and plantation sectors. Koggala Free Trade Zone, cinnamon industry and hotel workers travelled from Sri Lanka's south to participate.

Entitled "Oppose the Sri Lankan government's privatisation of state enterprises! Build workers' action committees to fight for jobs and wages!", it was the first in-person event organised by the SEP since the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020. The meeting was also livestreamed on the SEP's Facebook page and as of yesterday had been viewed by over 1,500 people.

SEP Political Committee member W. A. Sunil chaired the meeting, thanking the audience for observing the anti-COVID safety requirements. The meeting used a Far-UVC device to protect attendees and almost all participants wore masks.

Sunil told the meeting that the SEP rejected government and media claims that the COVID pandemic had ended. The SEP takes the coronavirus very seriously, he said, and warned "the virus is not over but still spreading in the form of new variants."

Sunil said there was rising working-class opposition to the Wickremesinghe government's privatisation of 430 state-owned enterprises, but the opposition was being blocked by the trade union bureaucracies. He also referred to the eruption of working-class struggles internationally and the drive towards world war by the US and other imperialist governments.

"To face this situation, our parties are working to mobilise the working class on a socialist program and to build a global anti-war movement of the workers and youth. Sri Lankan workers coming forward to fight the government's privatisation and other IMF measures must unite with their international class brothers and sisters and fight for a socialist perspective," Sunil said.

Addressing the meeting, SEP Political Committee member Vilani Peiris focused on the treacherous political role of the trade unions and the pseudo-left groups such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

These organisations betrayed the mass working-class uprising against the Rajapakse government in April–July last year, diverting it into support for a capitalist interim government. This enabled Wickremesinghe to come to power and unleash the massive social attacks now being unleashed, she said.

"In the guise of halting these attacks, these unions are now appealing for discussions with the very government that is launching this austerity program," she said.

Peiris told the meeting that some union leaders at the Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation had sent a letter calling on management to offer shares to employees after the corporation is privatised. The only way workers can defend their jobs and fight for the rights, she said, was through the establishment of action committees independent of the unions.

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah reviewed the situation facing plantation workers. Speaking in Tamil, which was translated in Sinhalese, he said the plantation unions, like their counterparts in other sectors, had become an industrial police force and referred to the ongoing repression of Alton Estate workers.

When Alton workers took up the fight for higher wages, management conspired with the union bureaucracy and the police to have 22 employees arrested and 34 sacked. "The plantation workers' action committee is fighting this repression and mobilising workers independently of the trade union bureaucracy," he said.

Thevarajah pointed out that last year Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers had united and fought against the social disaster being imposed by former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. "The Tamil nationalist parties," he said, "are seeking to divide the working class by intensifying communal demands and, like capitalist parties in Colombo, they want to weaken workers."

Thevarajah said the independent mobilisation of the working class as a united force is urgent, which is why we are presenting a socialist program calling for building workers' action committees.

Speaking on behalf of the IYSSE, Sakuntha Hirimutugoda explained how the big business policies of successive Sri Lankan governments have aggravated the crisis in health and education sectors and led to the mushrooming of private universities and schools across the country.

Hirimutugoda quoted from a Greenway Asia report, which

revealed that 6 percent of children between 5 and 18 years in Sri Lanka did not attend school. He also pointed out that the meagre Mahapola 5,000-rupee monthly loan for university students was not being paid and that other austerity measures were drastically impacting on university and school students. He told the meeting that the IYSSE would be holding more anti-war meetings to oppose the US-NATO military conflict against Russia in Ukraine and called on the audience to support this campaign.

SEP Assistant National Secretary Saman Gunadasa delivered the concluding address.

“While workers are now coming into battle against the government’s austerity attacks,” he said, “this meeting has been called to prevent their betrayal and to discuss how to take forward [for] these developing struggles,” Gunadasa said, referring to the treachery of the trade unions during the last year’s mass uprising.

The speaker said that 70 percent of Sri Lankans faced horrendous social conditions, with the World Food Program estimating that two-thirds of the population are unable to provide three meals a day to their families.

“Privatisation means that the government plans to transform all state ventures into profit-making entities for investors. Jobs and wages will be slashed and workloads increased. Patients using the public health service will have to pay for treatment. The government will pay back its loans to international finance capital by exacting it from workers,” he said.

Gunadasa referred to the US-led imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine and said the cost of this conflict will be extracted from the working class. These social attacks, he said, are fuelling the working-class struggles in the US and Europe.

The speaker pointed out that none of the opposition parliamentary parties in Sri Lanka or fake-left groups had any alternative to the government’s austerity measures. Samagi Jana Balawegaya leader Sajith Premadasa said that his administration would have negotiated good conditions when seeking an IMF bailout loan. These claims are false and designed to hoodwink the population, Gunadasa said, pointing out that the IMF measures were non-negotiable.

“Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna is also committed to IMF austerity. However, its leaders are now trying to pretend they oppose its program to exploit mass anger. At the same time, they insist if they were in power, the people will have to sacrifice to rebuild the collapsed economy,” Gunadasa said.

The pseudo-left FSP, he continued, has intensified its campaign for the establishment of “people’s councils,” which they claim will build power outside parliament. But the political purpose of these councils is not the independent mobilisation of workers on a socialist program but to “pressure the capitalist government and beg for concessions,” the speaker said.

Gunadasa explained the urgency for workers and youth to rally to fight for the program developed by the SEP during last year’s mass upsurge and its betrayal.

“Workers must build action committees in every factory, workplace, estate, neighbourhoods to take the fight into their hands and rally the rural masses to form their action committees. These committees are not unions in a new form. In these committees, the workers, the poor and other toilers can discuss their program and

the sort of action that must be launched,” he said.

“We also call for convening a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on the democratically-elected representatives of action committees. Building this power centre will pave the way for mobilising the masses to bring down the Wickremesinghe regime and fight for a government of workers and peasants.

“Its task will be to nationalise the big companies, large estates and banks under the democratic control of the workers. The enormous wealth of the rich should be expropriated and socialised, and the executive presidency abolished along with other repressive laws such as the Essential Public Services Act,” Gunadasa said. He urged workers and youth to join the SEP and IYSSE to fight for this perspective.

During the question-and-answer session, a retired railway worker said his pension payment had been subjected to cuts through withholding increments and wanted to know what the SEP thought about this sort of attack.

Sunil explained that attacks on pensions were part of a broader assault on the working class and “cannot be defeated by appealing to the regime that is imposing the burden of this unprecedented crisis on the masses. As the SEP explains, workers must form action committees and fight independently,” he said.

A worker from Hikkaduwa, a coastal town 120kms south of Colombo, said he came to the meeting to hear an alternative program. “The privatisation program will increase our economic problems and make living difficult. Electricity and water bills have increased and it is a problem sending my children to school. This is a problem for other people too,” he said.

Many of those attending the meeting signed the Plantation Workers Action Committee petition demanding the withdrawal of the framed-up trials against 22 Alton Estate workers and two rural youth. About 7,500 rupees worth of socialist literature was sold at the SEP literature table during the meeting and 9,600 rupees donated to the party’s development fund.



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