

Mobilise the working class against the Sri Lankan government's dictatorial Online Safety and Anti-Terrorism bills

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Last month, the Sri Lankan government issued two extraordinary gazette notifications announcing its Online Safety Bill (OSB) and the Anti-Terrorism Bill (ATB). On Tuesday, the OSB was presented to parliament, indicating it will be debated over two weeks. The ATB is scheduled to be presented to parliament soon.

If enacted, these bills will provide President Ranil Wickremesinghe with unprecedented dictatorial powers to suppress anti-government opposition and target working-class resistance to the government's International Monetary Fund dictated attacks on jobs, wages, and social conditions.

The OSB gives the president the power to both appoint and remove the participants of a five-member Online Safety Commission (OSC) and its chairman. In short, it is a commission totally controlled by the head of the state. OSC's role will be to suppress all online communication, including social media platforms, deemed to be circulating "false" and "unauthentic" statements.

The OSC can order the courts to imprison Sri Lankan citizens, in or outside the country, accused of violating the online safety laws. It can also order internet service providers or internet intermediaries to disable the accused services and to block any financial support. This is necessary, the bill states, to "protect persons against damage caused by communication of false statements or threatening, alarming or distressing statements."

Part three of the bill, however, indicates the bill's principal target. It states: "Any person, whether in or outside Sri Lanka, who poses a threat to national security, public health or public order or promotes feelings of ill-will and hostility between different classes of people, by communicating a false statement, commits an offence."

These broad-ranging formulas allow the OSC to suppress any opposition to the government, including campaigns against the escalating attacks on democratic and social rights and, above all, the mobilisation of the working class against the capitalist class and its ruling regime.

Anyone convicted of OSC charges will be "liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years or to a fine," with the punishments doubled for those found guilty of second offences.

Several offences cited in the bill include communicating false statements to cause religious disharmony and disturbances. This

has nothing to do with defending religious harmony but is aimed at further consolidating Sinhala-Buddhist hegemony, which has been used for decades by Colombo's ruling elite to divide the working class. Cheating, fraud, and child abuse are also listed as offences in the OSB bill.

The ATB and the OSB are aimed at vastly strengthening the repressive powers of the president and his government. The ATB, it declares, is necessary for "the protection of national security of Sri Lanka and its people from acts of terrorism." This is a lie. The regime's real concern is protecting the capitalist class and its state.

Under this bill, terrorism includes any anti-government activity, political dissent, or opposition. The "offence of terrorism," it states, is "intimidating the public or a section of the public," as well as "wrongfully or unlawfully compelling the Government of Sri Lanka, or any other Government, or an international organisation, to do or to abstain from doing any act."

In another sweeping attack on freedom of expression, it targets anyone "who publishes or causes to be published a statement, or speaks any word or words, or makes signs or visible representations which is likely to be understood by some or all of the members of the public as a direct or indirect encouragement or inducement for them to commit, prepare or instigate the offence of terrorism."

Within the broad scope of the legislation, any individual or organisation calling for or involved in the mobilisation of workers, youth, and the oppressed masses against the government, and demanding their legitimate rights, can be branded a "terrorist," and accused of carrying out "terrorist acts."

Those accused of terrorism can be punished with life imprisonment, with the prison sentences of those involved in the "direct or indirect encouragement" of terrorism liable for 10 years' jail and heavy fines.

Under the ATB's wide-ranging definition of terrorism, any individual can be arrested and detained for one year without the filing of a legal case, i.e., arbitrarily. This can be extended continuously through a judicial directive.

The ATB is to replace the existing Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) of 1979, which has been used over the last 44 years and in the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to suppress unrest among the Tamil minority, rural youth, workers, and other opponents of the government.

As the history of the PTA demonstrates, the new bill has nothing to do with fighting “terrorism” but is to strengthen the state against workers, the poor and young people. Since his anti-democratic elevation into the presidency, Wickremesinghe has used the PTA to detain student protest leaders and anti-government activists.

The ruling class has been shaken to the core by the multi-million strong mass anti-government uprising in April–July last year which forced former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign, and his government to collapse. Social media was the main means for communication and mobilisation used by the masses in this struggle. Wickremesinghe is determined to stifle these forms of communication.

The trade union bureaucracies, backed by pseudo-left groups, betrayed the working-class movement, subordinating it to the parliamentary opposition parties and their campaign for an interim capitalist government. While this created the conditions for the ruling elite to temporarily stabilise Sri Lankan capitalism, the moves to entrench a presidential dictatorship underscore its fear of another social explosion.

Throughout this year, workers have come forward in numerous strikes and protests against the government’s IMF austerity attacks on jobs, wages and pension cuts, and in opposition to privatisation and unbearable price increases. As the World Bank reports, poverty is expected to hit 28 percent of Sri Lanka’s total population this year, up from 25 percent in 2022.

The trade union bureaucracies are doing everything they can to dissipate workers’ anger and prevent the eruption of mass struggles. While using these betrayals to deepen his government’s attacks, Wickremesinghe knows he cannot rely solely on the union bureaucracies and is rapidly moving to strengthen his autocratic powers.

The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the main bourgeois opposition party, has declared that it will take legal action against the OSB. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) parliamentarian Vijitha Herath has also said his party will take the Supreme Court action against the new bill.

These political organisations are blatantly hoodwinking the masses. The leaders of both these parties, whether in government or in opposition, unwaveringly backed the PTA and other repressive laws during Colombo’s war against the LTTE to suppress the Tamil minority, the working class and youth.

Both parties are fully committed to the IMF’s austerity demands. They know that the Supreme Court might propose cosmetic changes to the new bills but that the government will use its majority to ram these bills through parliament. In power, these parties would not hesitate to use these laws against a mass movement of the working class and the rural masses.

The working class cannot rely on the opposition parties and the trade union bureaucracies to defend its democratic and social rights. That is why the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers and young people, including students, to take the initiative.

The working class must mobilise independently of every faction of the bourgeoisie and supporters in the trade union bureaucracies and the fake left. We urge youth to turn to the working class. The fight for jobs, wages, pensions, and social rights, including health

and education, is part of the struggle to defend democratic rights.

Just as social media platforms were used in the past to communicate freely, discuss and organise class actions, so they must be used to initiate a wide-ranging discussion on the impact of these draconian laws on their struggles and their rights.

We call upon workers to form independent action committees in every factory, plantation, neighbourhood, and other major economic centres, and for the rural masses to establish their own action committees. The Sri Lankan working class is an integral part of the global working class and needs to unite with their international class brothers and sisters to take forward this struggle.

The turn by the Wickremesinghe regime and the capitalist class towards dictatorial forms of rule in Sri Lanka is not an isolated development. The crisis-ridden ruling elites everywhere—from major imperialist powers to underdeveloped countries—are adopting autocratic forms of rule and bolstering extreme-right forces to suppress the unfolding working-class struggles. Capitalism offers only war, fascism, worsening social inequality and poverty.

To begin the struggle to defend democratic rights we demand: Abolish the Executive Presidency! Repeal of all repressive laws, including the Public Security Act and Essential Public Services Act! No to the OSB and the ATB!

To defend all social rights, it is necessary to reject IMF austerity; repudiate all foreign debts; seize the wealth of the super-rich; and nationalise the major banks and corporations under democratic workers’ control.

The Wickremesinghe government must be brought down, and a workers’ and peasants’ government established to implement the socialist policies. These include the re-organisation of production and distribution under workers’ control to end the poverty facing millions, the provision of jobs for all on a livable wage, guaranteed fertiliser subsidies and the cancellation of the debts of poor farmers, and free health and education with modern facilities for all.

That is why the SEP is calling for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates democratically elected from their action committees. The congress will provide the basis to unite the working class and rally the rural poor in a common struggle for this socialist program.



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