

Enthusiastic response to IYSSE lecture on historical materialism at Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka

Our reporters

5 November 2023

Late last month the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a lecture titled “An introduction to historical materialism” at Peradeniya University in the city of Kandy.

Attended by about 60 students, lecturers and workers, the October 26 event was the first of a series of lectures to be held by the IYSSE on the invitation of the university’s Political Science Association. Other planned lectures are “The relevance of the Communist Manifesto today,” “The historical roots of dissolution of the Soviet Union,” “The global capitalist economic crisis and its implications” and “Leon Trotsky and his place in history.”

In the lead-up to the lecture, which was held in the third week of Israel’s genocidal attacks, SEP and IYSSE members distributed statements by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and *World Socialist Web Site* calling for the mobilisation of the international working class to stop Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

That the IYSSE has been given the opportunity to present these lectures at Peradeniya University is significant. It is an indication that layers of students and young people are turning to Marxism and scientific socialism to understand the historic and deepening crisis of Sri Lankan and global capitalism and the political program needed to fight.

In April–July last year, the Sri Lankan ruling elite was confronted by a mass uprising involving millions of workers, young people and the poor against Colombo’s attempts to impose the country’s unprecedented economic crisis on the population. Millions of people, including tens of thousands of students, demanded the ouster of the President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, and called for “systemic change.”

While Rajapakse was forced to resign, and his government collapsed, the mass movement was betrayed by the trade unions, backed by various pseudo-left groups such as the Frontline Socialist Party, which diverted the uprising into support for an interim capitalist government as proposed by the opposition parliamentary parties. This paved the way for Ranil Wickremesinghe to be elevated into the presidency and to form a new government committed to brutal International Monetary Fund austerity measures. These far-reaching social attacks have provoked a new wave of struggles by workers and students.

Last month’s lecture was given by Pani Wijesiriwardena, a

member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Political Committee, who was introduced by IYSSE member Sakuntha Hirimutugoda. The lecture was translated into Tamil by Shree Haran.

Wijesiriwardena began by explaining that historical materialism was the scientific theory of social development elaborated by Karl Marx and Friederich Engels as a part of the struggle to develop a revolutionary program and perspective for the emancipation of the working class. This scientific method of analysis underpins Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, his three volumes of *Das Kapital* and all the essential works of Marx and Engels.

“The *Communist Manifesto*, written in 1848, examines the history of human society and states, ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,’” Wijesiriwardena said. He then quoted from Marx’s *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, published in 1859, which sums up the basic postulates of historical materialism.

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production...”

“At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or—this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms—with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution.”

Based on this approach, Wijesiriwardena elaborated how man had overcome serfdom and feudal society. He explained that capitalist social relations had been transformed into fetters on the further development of the productive forces.

The lecturer said: “Although the capitalist system today has developed into a globally integrated economy, it is rooted in nation-states, which are antagonistic to each other. Production has been socialised but the means of production are owned and controlled by a tiny elite of capitalists. They are organised to extract surplus value, which is transformed into profit. The existing system of nation-states, private ownership of the means of production, and production for profit are utterly hostile to the development of productive forces.”

Wijesiriwardena explained that World War I and World War II,

which killed 17 million and 60 million human beings respectively, were manifestations of these historic contradictions.

“Extreme manifestations of this historical contradictions within the capitalist system are also seen today in the war against Russia in Ukraine by the US-NATO powers; the genocidal war against the Palestinians by the Netanyahu regime in Israel with the backing of imperialist powers, and the US-led preparations for war against China.

“Conflict between any of the nuclear-armed powers could rapidly develop towards a catastrophic nuclear world war, threatening the very existence of mankind.”

The speaker explained that mass unemployment, the death of millions from poverty, malnutrition, pandemics and ecological disaster, and the escalating attacks on the social and democratic rights of working people, were all a product of capitalism and an expression of its irrationality.

“This catastrophe can only be halted through the overthrow of the capitalist system which is based on the nation-state system and the production for profit. It must be replaced with the rational reorganisation of production for human needs. This means, placing the means of production under the democratic control of the working class. In other words, only through replacement of global capitalist economy with a world socialist economy can society go forward.”

The speaker explained that the only social force capable of carrying out this task was the international working class. He drew attention to the essential necessity of a revolutionary party.

“The classic example of this is the Bolshevik Party, which provided the leadership for the 1917 October Revolution. It was the first and most powerful intervention of human beings into the historical process, based on a conscious understanding of the Marxist analysis of capitalism, and with a socialist perspective. World War I was stopped because of the enormous political impact of the October Revolution,” he said.

Wijesiriwardena explained how the betrayals of the social democratic parties, and the Stalinist bureaucracy, which emerged as a result of the economic backwardness and isolation of the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, prevented the victory of socialist revolutions in many countries around the world.

He pointed out that the Trotskyist movement, which emerged in struggle against Stalinism, continues, then and now, to defend Marxism.

“Today this fight is being carried forward only by the ICFI and its Socialist Equality Parties, and the IYSSE, its youth wing,” Wijesiriwardena said. He called on the students at the lecture to join the IYSSE and become daily readers of the WSWS and its Marxist analysis of world developments.

During the question and answer session, Werahera, a non-academic university worker, asked how to develop socialist consciousness. “It true that issues can be resolved through equal distribution of wealth. But the issue is how can this be done? How do you build social equality?” he asked.

Wijesiriwardena pointed out that socialism is not a just a question of the equal distribution of wealth but the “abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the rational organisation of the productive forces.” Because socialism liberates

the productive forces from the fetters of private ownership and the nation-state, it is both necessary and possible.

The lecturer pointed out that mankind has entered a period in which social consciousness is changing profoundly. “However, socialist consciousness,” he explained, “is not spontaneously developed but must be brought into the working class by the revolutionary party.

“Social equality can only be realised through the reorganisation of the economy along socialist lines. Capitalist parties claim there is no money for social needs but at the same time, they pay back foreign loans by intensifying the exploitation of workers. We propose the repudiation of foreign loans as a whole,” he said, noting that the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna are committed to the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund.

One student asked what students should do.

Wijesiriwardena explained that it was necessary to understand that the working class is the only revolutionary force in society because of its unique role in capitalist production in the creation of surplus value and because it was a propertyless class.

“The working class is the principal productive force in society. The political logic of its resistance to capitalist exploitation and oppression leads to the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. It is also an international class whose victory will break down the barriers of national states and unite humanity,” he said.

Students should turn to the working class, “which means participating in the struggles of the working class with a revolutionary program and joining the fight to build the revolutionary party.”

The lecturer made clear that the “student politics” promoted by the Inter-University Students Federation and the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party, were anti-historic and anti-Marxist.

Wijesiriwardena explained, “One of the chief characteristics of pseudo-left organisations is their hostility to the working class because of its revolutionary role in society. These formations oppose the struggle for a revolutionary perspective in the working class. They turn students away from the working class and towards pressuring whichever capitalist government happens to be in power, or aligning themselves with the bourgeois ‘opposition’ parties.”



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