Sri Lanka: Workers and youth speak out about worsening conditions under JVP/NPP government

Our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members have spoken with workers, students and the rural poor about worsening living conditions and growing disillusionment with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government.

The soaring cost of living, poverty and deterioration of essential services that drove millions into the streets in the 2022 mass uprising, forcing President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign, remain unresolved. The JVP/NPP, which exploited mass hostility to the traditional capitalist parties to win office in 2024, has continued the International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity programme imposed by its predecessor, Ranil Wickremesinghe—imposing heavier taxes on workers and the poor, gutting public services and pressing ahead with privatisation.

The discussions took place during a campaign for an SEP public meeting, "Two Years of JVP/NPP Rule: A Government of Big Business and IMF Austerity," on November 10 at the Colombo Public Library auditorium. SEP/IYSSE members distributed Sinhala and Tamil versions of the meeting announcement at workplaces, universities and residential areas, discussing the government's record and the need for an independent socialist movement of the working class.

Radhika Abhilash, a second-year student in the University of Colombo's Faculty of Arts, said the 2022 uprising had brought no improvement for ordinary people.

"After Gotabaya Rajapaksa was ousted, Wickremesinghe took power," he said. "All we had ever seen was rule by the traditional political parties. When Anura Kumara Dissanayake came to power as president, we hoped to see a new social politics. But that did not happen."

Abhilash described overcrowded student accommodation and the difficulties of studying under increasingly intolerable conditions. Eight or nine students share a 15-by-15-foot room, while one of the hostel's two study rooms has been converted into sleeping accommodation.

"There are no conditions in which to study. The women students simply cannot bear this situation. The food in the canteens is unhygienic. A packet of lunch costs 190 rupees."

His monthly expenses are about 35,000 rupees, forcing him to work additional jobs on weekends to avoid burdening his parents.

Abhilash questioned why student protests and lecturers' demonstrations over staff shortages were not united with workers' struggles. This led to a discussion about the role of the trade union bureaucracies in dividing and suppressing opposition to the government's austerity measures.

The discussion with SEP/IYSSE campaigners also addressed the international roots of Sri Lanka's economic crisis and the need to unite the struggles of workers and youth across national boundaries.

"We are used to thinking in terms of conditions within Sri Lanka's borders—at most, the South Asian situation," Abhilash said. He was struck by the common problems confronting workers and youth internationally, pointing to the mass student protests in France and the growing danger of imperialist war. He said he intended to attend the November 10 meeting to discuss these issues further.

Maheesha Warusavithana, a lecturer at the Open University of Sri Lanka, discussed the October 30 university lecturers' strike led by the Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA). The demands included academic recruitment, relief from excessive

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workloads, adequate facilities, an end to wage disparities and allowance cuts, and tax relief.

He said he had enthusiastically joined the strike, march and seminar but was left questioning how the struggle could be taken forward. Instead of fighting for the longstanding demand that education spending be increased to 6 percent of gross domestic product, FUTA leaders proposed asking the government for a phased "roadmap" towards that target.

"Actually, it was only after reading the article published on the *World Socialist Web Site* about the strike that I understood that the union leaders are always trying to trap us in the work of pressuring the government," Warusavithana said.

He said the struggle was not simply against the government but also against the IMF, which dictated the attacks. "That is why our fight must necessarily be a political fight against capitalism and a fight for socialism."

Warusavithana also pointed to the role of union leaders in bringing the JVP/NPP government to power. He supported the SEP's call for workers to establish independent rank-and-file committees.

"We must build organisations that fight for the interests of workers, independent of those unions, to carry our struggles forward. I think the rank-and-file committees you propose are suitable for this."

A postal assistant in the Puttalam district, who has worked in the postal service for 30 years, described the impact of chronic staff shortages. Workers find it extremely difficult to obtain leave, even in emergencies, while his salary has risen by only about 4,000 rupees over the last two budgets. Both his children are still studying.

He asked his union's Colombo representative whether it would oppose the staffing crisis and demand new recruitment. According to the worker, the official declared that the union would not oppose the government's decisions and that workers should endure the situation longer.

His co-workers were now questioning why they should continue paying union dues at all, he said.

Ajith, a railway sanitation worker from Ratmalana, described how he and his colleagues had been denied permanent employment despite working for nearly 12 years.

Before the elections, JVP trade union leaders promised permanent appointments and asked workers to put up posters supporting the party.

"Now, for two years, they keep saying they are still looking for circulars. They are dragging the work out, saying the appointments are not in order."

Ajith receives just 1,600 rupees a day, with no paid leave. Whenever he takes a day off, he loses that day's wages. He said 48 sanitation workers faced the same conditions.

A **54-year-old woman** from Munnakkarai, Negombo, described her struggle to support her bedridden husband and three children. She undertakes domestic work and seeks employment caring for patients in government hospitals.

"I get 3,000 rupees a day for looking after a patient. That is how I live," she said.

Her family needs around 60,000 rupees a month for basic expenses, including food and her children's education.

"I applied for Aswesuma [the government's limited welfare benefits programme] several times but did not get it. My husband has been bedridden for about five years. Our lives have collapsed compared to the situation ten years ago. Although the people took to the streets in 2022, none of those problems have been solved."

The number of Aswesuma welfare beneficiaries has fallen from 1,773,445 in 2023 to 1,251,522 in 2026—a reduction of more than 520,000—amid the austerity programme continued by the JVP/NPP government.

The discussions revealed growing opposition to the JVP/NPP government and the trade union bureaucracies that have suppressed workers' struggles. They underscored the necessity for workers and youth to break from all the capitalist parties and build an independent political movement of the working class, fighting for socialist policies as part of an international struggle against capitalism.

We invite workers and young people to participate in the November 10 public meeting at the Colombo Public Library auditorium at 4 p.m.



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