

Halt the attacks on living conditions! Fight for socialist policies!

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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As Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena completes just 18 months in office, his “national unity government” already confronts growing opposition from workers, young people and the rural poor to its International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

Over the past six weeks, workers in the postal, health and education sectors, as well as in the graphite mines and plantations, have engaged in strikes and demonstrations. Professionals, including doctors, also launched protests over their jobs and working conditions. These struggles have been sporadic and isolated only because the trade unions, which are committed to defending the government, have deliberately blocked any political fight.

Last week, farmers in many parts of the country took to the streets, for the second time this year, to oppose delays in the payment of fertiliser subsidies. Thousands of university students have been involved in continuous protests against the privatisation of education and police attacks on their campaign.

Small traders and shop workers have also held demonstrations in one town after another, demanding a reduction of the VAT (value added tax), which the government increased in line with the IMF’s demands.

In the North and East of the island, Tamils have been involved in protests over social conditions and the suppression of their democratic rights. Despite the end of the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, these former war zones are still subjected to repressive military occupation.

Writing on July 3, the *Sunday Times* political columnist nervously summed up the volatile situation facing the ruling class: “The public discontent can be gauged to some extent by what the civilian intelligence agencies of the state discovered. This week there were 56 protests countrywide by different groups for different reasons but all directed against the government. Therein lies a strong message.”

Sirisena came to office in the January 2015 presidential election on the basis of a bogus campaign, promising to defend democracy and end the autocratic rule of President Mahinda Rajapakse. As a former minister in the Rajapakse government, Sirisena had the backing of sections of his Sri Lanka Freedom

Party (SLFP) and then opposition United National Party (UNP).

An array of trade unions and so-called civil society organisations, as well as the pseudo-left groups, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), all promoted Sirisena as the “democratic alternative” to Rajapakse’s police-state methods and attacks on living conditions. The opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) also threw their weight behind Sirisena’s campaign.

The claim that Sirisena’s election represented a “democratic revolution” was always a fraud. The ousting of Rajapakse was a carefully orchestrated regime-change operation, involving key figures in the SLFP and UNP working closely with Washington and New Delhi. The US had backed Rajapakse’s war and turned a blind eye to his anti-democratic methods, but could not tolerate his close relations with Beijing.

The new “national unity” government headed by Sirisena and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister systematically integrated the country into the US “pivot to Asia” and its preparations for war against China. At the same time, it has forged close ties with India, a key strategic partner of Washington in its war drive against Beijing.

The government has rapidly ditched its “democratic pretensions,” including Sirisena’s pledges to investigate human rights violations during the island’s communal war and to abolish the autocratic executive presidency. Apart from some cosmetic changes, Sirisena retains all the extensive presidential powers that were wielded by Rajapakse.

Now, as the deepening breakdown of global capitalism impacts on Sri Lanka, the government is accelerating its austerity agenda to impose the burden of the crisis onto the backs of workers and the poor, while further opening up the country to foreign investors. The economy confronts mounting debts and its exports have been hit hard by recessionary tendencies in the EU and US, as well as the US confrontation with Russia and the wars in the Middle East.

The IMF has agreed to a \$US1.5 billion loan to avert a serious balance of payments crisis but only under severe conditions. These included slashing the budget deficit to 3.5 percent of gross domestic product by 2020 (half last year’s deficit), privatising state-owned enterprises, reducing price

subsidies and fully opening the finance sector to international capital.

In response to the British decision to exit the EU, Wickremesinghe declared that the government will expedite free trade agreements (FTA) with India, China, UK, Japan and Singapore. These agreements will inevitably involve further attacks on the jobs and conditions of workers as Sri Lankan producers strive to boost their “international competitiveness.”

As it steps up the assault on living standards, the government is also strengthening the police-state apparatus built up in 30 years of civil war. It will soon present new legislation on national security, organised crime and national intelligence. The violent police attacks on student protests are a warning that the government will ruthlessly use the full force of the state to suppress any popular resistance to its policies.

As in every country, the ruling class is in disarray in the face of rising social tensions produced by the global economic crisis. Relations in the ruling coalition between the SLFP and UNP are strained.

Rajapakse leads a dissident faction of 30 SLFP parliamentarians and other allies that are seeking to exploit mass popular discontent by stirring up Sinhala chauvinism and appealing to Buddhist monks, sections of the military and other reactionary sections of Sinhalese society. He is seeking to forge an extreme right-wing movement that would make a bid for power and take on the working class.

In response, the pseudo-lefts, civil society groups and trade unions that put Sirisena in power are stepping up their efforts to defend his pro-US government and anti-working class policies. Citizen Power (Purawesi Balaya) and the National Movement for Just Society (NMSJ), for example, criticise the government from the standpoint of returning it to the “correct path”—that is, promoting the dangerous illusion that Sirisena can be pressured to change course.

NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne, who has played a particularly pernicious role in defending the government over the past 18 months, has taken a slightly different tack. He recently warned that “Rajapakse is planning a political change with a help of military coup.” This line serves to subordinate mounting popular opposition to the capitalist “national unity” government.

Another pseudo-left group, the USP, is campaigning for “united committees at workplaces and a national-level workers’ centre” to face the government’s attacks. The Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) is advocating the building of a centre of “left” groups. Like their liberal allies, the USP and FSP are deeply hostile to any independent movement of the working class and are seeking to limit any action to pressuring, and in that way propping up, the government.

Workers and youth in Sri Lanka have to turn to a new internationalist and socialist perspective and break politically from the ruling class as a whole—both the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe and the Rajapakse wings, as well as all their

political allies, apologists and hangers-on.

The eruption of strikes and protests is part of a resurgence of working-class struggles internationally, with growing signs of resistance and opposition in France, Greece and other parts of Europe, and the US, as well as in India, China and elsewhere in Asia. The allies of Sri Lankan workers in defending their social rights are not to be found in the parties of the capitalist class in Colombo, but among their class brothers and sisters around the world.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, along with its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is alone in waging a political struggle to unite the working class internationally in the fight against war and austerity.

On the eve of the presidential election in January 2015, SEP general secretary Wije Dias explained: “The struggle against imperialist war and austerity is necessarily international in scope. It is literally impossible to oppose the predatory actions of imperialism or the global conglomerates and financial houses on the basis of one nation, no matter how big or small.”

The SEP calls on workers and youth to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. Such a government will implement socialist policies, including the nationalisation of all major companies, plantations and banks under the democratic control of workers, so as to rationally organise production for the benefit of majority of the society. It will repudiate all foreign loans.

Only on that basis can a genuine political struggle be waged to defend public education, health care and welfare programs and all the social and democratic rights of workers and the urban and rural poor. We urge workers and youth to join the SEP to build it as the mass revolutionary party needed to lead these struggles.



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