

SEP and IYSSE members hold discussions with anti-government protesters across Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
6 April 2022

The anti-government protests in Sri Lanka erupted on a wider scale yesterday. Demonstrations were organised among school and university students and various sectors of the working class.

The protesters demanded the resignation of “Gota”—President Gotabaya Rajapakse—blaming the government for skyrocketing inflation, shortages of fuel and other basic commodities, and hours of electricity blackouts every day.

Ceylon Electricity Board workers held a rally in front of the Colombo head office, while the Bank Employees Union called another protest. Health workers held demonstrations at several hospitals, mainly demanding an end to the scarcity of medicines.

Thousands of government school teachers and principals, who waged a 100-day strike for better salaries last year, demonstrated in many education divisions across the country.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members intervened in protests with their slogans, such as: “Defeat the government’s austerity program!” “Build Action Committees!” “Reject interim government!” and “Repudiate foreign debt!”

Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC) members drew a significant response among teachers. TSPSC secretary and SEP member Kapila Fernando addressed a crowd of nearly 100 teachers in front of a main school in Chilaw, presenting an international socialist program. Fernando stressed that the government should be ousted, but it had to be replaced by a workers’ and peasants’ government.

“Whatever government is formed by any other capitalist party or pro-capitalist organisation, it will

definitely implement the austerity measures of the IMF,” he explained. “They protect the profits of the capitalists at the expense of the workers and the oppressed.

“The income of not only corrupt politicians should be exposed. The main thing that must be exposed is the vast wealth accumulated by the exploitation of the big business capitalists. That vast wealth must be used to meet the social needs of the working class and other oppressed masses.

“We must also refuse to repay the huge amount of foreign debt. It can only be done by uniting the working class in an international struggle. There is no national solution to this crisis.”

Fernando explained that the only way forward for workers in Sri Lanka to end the difficult conditions they faced was to join hands with the international working class and fight for world socialism.

He ended by appealing to teachers: “For that, break away from the trade unions and form independent action committees of workers and join the SEP.”

Many of the teachers, who carefully listened to him, read the SEP statement distributed among them.

SEP campaigners also intervened in a teachers’ protest in Homagama, a suburb of Colombo, the capital. Around 500 teachers participated. They gathered near the supermarket at the junction and chanted slogans: “We need Democracy,” “Stop the government repression,” “Bring down the cost of living,” “Go home Gota” and “Save our children’s future.”

Nirupa, a mathematics teacher, said she believed the struggle should go forward with more meaningful slogans. “We came to this struggle not just to

overthrow the government. We have things to win. We want our children to have a better future. I think we need to focus on a system where all working people have a better standard of living.”

After a discussion with a TSPSC member, she added: “Yes, I think the workers still do not know about the power of the workers. We need to change that.”

Another teacher, Kodithuwakku, said that, after a discussion with SEP members, he agreed that the anti-government struggles had to be guided by the correct political program.

“The leadership of the working class in this struggle is extremely crucial. Just removing President Rajapakse from power would not solve the problems of the masses. The problem is not to change the people in power, but to change the class in power.”

Kodithuwakku added that the trade unions fear that the working class would realise its real power and that was why they had not called a major struggle in working class sectors. “The workers must understand the treacherous role of the trade union and organise independently to lead these struggles.”

In the civil war-ravaged northern city of Jaffna, Northern Province Jaffna University students joined the island-wide mass protests, holding a rally on April 4. Protesters chanted slogans such as: “Gota GO Home.”

About 1,000 Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim students participated together in this protest. After a 30-year communal war by successive Colombo regimes against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which ended in May 2009, students and workers are showing unity across ethnic lines.

This objective unity has been demonstrated despite the Colombo establishment’s repeated anti-Tamil propaganda and provocations, as well as the promotion of communal politics by Tamil bourgeois parties.

At the beginning about 100 students started the demonstration at the main gate of Jaffna University. After an hour many more students joined the protest, holding placards against the Rajapakse government.

The students then marched into Jaffna town and held a rally in front of the Jaffna main bus stand, watched by thousands of people. While returning to the campus, students held a protest in front of the office of fisheries minister Douglas Devanada.

On the same day, students at Kilinochchi and Vavuniya campuses also held rallies.

This unified struggle is creating fear throughout the Sri Lankan ruling class and opposition parties, including the Tamil bourgeois parties. Jaffna University has been a centre of the promotion of Tamil nationalism.

The Tamil bourgeois parties, including Tamil National Alliance, have remained silent about the mass upsurge in Sri Lanka.

WSWS correspondents asked students why they were participating in this struggle.

Dilhara from Matale answered: “We decided to intervene in this protest movement to get solutions to our problems. We have not received the Mahapola scholarship monies properly. One meal that was 30 rupees has gone up to 130 rupees. We are voicing these problems. We demand that Gotabhaya must resign.

“We do not mean that the other opposition parties should come into power. We want a true republic that represents our interests. Not only Gotabhaya, the whole parliament members must resign.”

Another student commented: “Conditions are too bad to live in the universities. The government has no interest in us or the common people. We are starving and we cannot study without electricity. These issues are not the rulers’ issues. If we remain silent, we are not going to get any solution. That is why we are protesting.”



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