

Oppose Sri Lankan trade unions attempt to subordinate class struggles to upcoming elections! Prepare a general strike against government austerity! Fight for socialist policies!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
28 June 2024

Socialist Equality Party members distributed Sinhala and Tamil versions of the statement below to a protest of striking Sri Lankan teachers in Colombo on Wednesday, June 26. The nationwide action was for higher wages.

The government responded by unleashing a brutal police attack on the protesters while President Wickremesinghe declared that day in Kandy that there would be no salary increase for teachers or any public employees this year. Wickremesinghe also warned that if teachers “deprive students of their education, steps will be taken to designate teaching as an essential service.” In other words, the repressive Essential Public Services Act would be unleashed against teachers, with harsh penalties, including the dismissal, jailing and the fining of striking teachers.

These developments powerfully confirm the SEP’s call for a working-class counter offensive against the Wickremesinghe regime’s austerity measures and the preparation of a political general strike based on the fight for socialist policies.

Beginning early this month, a series of protests have occurred in Sri Lanka involving tens of thousands of public sector employees. These include railway, postal and electricity workers, Samurdhi development officers, and public-school teachers.

On Monday and Tuesday this week thousands of public-school non-academic workers held a two-day sick leave strike, while over 250,000 teachers and principals are holding a sick-leave protest today [Wednesday]. The indefinite strike by non-academic employees has now entered its eighth week. The trade unions have been compelled to call these actions amid mounting anger by their members over the continuous deterioration of living and social conditions.

Many of these protests have demanded higher wages and opposed the privatisation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the slashing of government funds to public health and education.

These demands are in direct conflict with the government’s savage austerity program as ordered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The aim of the IMF program is to place the burden of Sri Lanka’s unprecedented economic crisis onto the backs of the masses, increase state revenue so as to repay outstanding foreign debts and boost big-business profits.

The trade unions, however, have called these isolated, scattered and limited actions, while falsely claiming that workers can defend their wages, jobs and living conditions by pressuring the government in the lead-up to the forthcoming elections.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led trade unions and their backers are openly campaigning for workers to withhold industrial action, telling them that the solution is to bring their National People’s Power (NPP) candidate to power in the upcoming presidential elections.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon the Sri Lankan working class to reject all attempts by the trade unions to derail its struggles and subordinate it to the capitalist parliamentary framework. Protests and strikes by every section of the working class point to the objective need for a common struggle to defeat the Wickremesinghe regime’s social attacks.

The SEP urges workers to prepare a political general strike to defend their wages, jobs, living conditions, democratic rights and for increased funding for public health and education. None of these demands can be won without a political fight against the Wickremesinghe and its IMF measures as part of the struggle to overthrow the capitalist system.

Early this month, the IMF released \$US336 million, the third installment of its \$US3 billion bailout loan, insisting on the need for a continuation of its brutal program. On June 14, Peter Breuer, the IMF’s senior official for Sri Lanka, declared that despite some positive developments, “the economy is still vulnerable and the path to debt sustainability remains on a knife edge.” Responding to claims by some political parties that they would “renegotiate” the IMF program, Breuer warned: “A key priority in the time ahead is to persevere with the reforms...”

While the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the NPP, the JVP’s electoral front, have called for “renegotiating” the IMF’s program, this is to hoodwink the masses. Both these parties, and the trade union bureaucracies, are fully committed to the IMF measures.

Sri Lanka’s economic turmoil is the sharp expression of a global economic crisis, which was exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, the intensifying US and NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the imperialist backing of Israel’s genocidal war against the Palestinians.

These conflicts are part of the imperialist powers' slide into a catastrophic third world war.

Figures from the World Bank reveal that poverty has rapidly increased in Sri Lanka—doubling from 13 percent of the population in 2021, to over 25 percent in 2023. Colombo's ongoing austerity measures will worsen this situation.

To secure the third installment of the IMF loan, the government has agreed to impose more taxes, including on property, as well as taxes and levies on services such as software exports.

In refusing any wage rise to non-academic workers, President Wickremesinghe previously told the parliament that the government has no funds for higher salaries for any public sector worker and that any such claim could only be considered in 2025.

The consensus of the capitalist class is to repay the defaulted foreign debts of April 2022 to international capital and foreign governments at the expense of the working class. To secure this money, the government must impose further cuts to vital funding for social welfare, sell the SOEs and to raise taxes.

The working class is not responsible for the huge foreign debts accumulated by successive capitalist governments, and which were used to maintain the capitalist system. Nor is the working class responsible for the capitalist crisis.

Why should the working class and the poor be made to suffer the burden of this crisis by sacrificing their wages, jobs, pensions, public health and education and other social welfare programs? The government's austerity attacks have already reduced the social situation facing the masses to an unbearable level.

Workers cannot defend their rights by pressuring the Wickremesinghe regime or any other capitalist government. Yet the trade union bureaucracies insist that this is the only alternative.

The JVP-controlled trade unions are vociferously calling on workers to bring an NPP government to power, claiming this will solve their problems.

A statement issued by Niroshan Gorakana, the leader of the JVP-controlled Port Trade Union Collective and the All-Ceylon Port Workers General Union, warned Wickremesinghe: "You have only four months." In the same breath, Gorakana told workers: "Dear brothers and sisters, until that day has dawned, we will do whatever we can."

On June 6, when the parliament passed its new Electricity Bill to dismantle the Ceylon Electricity Board, the JVP-controlled All-Ceylon Electricity Employees Union leader Ranjan Jayalal said: "This government will have to go home, and they deserve a defeat," and insisted it only had four months.

In line with the JVP's agenda, these union leaders have insisted that workers not take industrial action against the government's attacks, but wait until the scheduled presidential election.

The Sri Lankan working class went through a tremendous experience during the mass uprising in 2022.

While President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government confronted a rising tide of mass struggles, the trade unions called two one-day general strikes and then diverted workers into supporting SJB and JVP calls for an "interim government."

This subordination of the working class to this perspective, which was fully backed by the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party, was one of main reasons for the defeat of the mass uprising. This opened the way for Wickremesinghe to be elevated into the presidency.

To avoid another such debacle, workers must take the struggle into their own hands and prepare a political general strike. We call upon

workers to form democratically-elected action committees at all workplaces, factories and plantations, independent of the trade union bureaucracies and the capitalist political parties to which they are aligned.

The SEP proposes the following demands as the driving force for the political general strike:

- * Scrap all the austerity measures dictated by the IMF!

- * Guarantee a livable wage for all workers starting from 100,000 rupees and indexed to the cost of living!

- * Repudiate all foreign debts! Instead of paying debts, funds should be used to reduce the price of food, fuel, electricity, water, medicines and other essentials needed by working people!

- * Reinstate all subsidies to provide adequate funds for effective education, decent healthcare and fertiliser for rural farmers! Guarantee adequate prices for farmers' harvests!

- * Seize big businesses and put them under workers' control to provide jobs and fulfill the social needs of the working population!

- * Guarantee jobs for all with decent and safe working conditions!

- * Cancel the debts of rural farmers and small business holders!

The success of a political general strike depends on the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on democratically elected delegates from action committees of workers and the rural poor throughout the island. The SEP advanced this program in mid-July 2022, during the mass uprising, to counter the capitalist onslaught.

Workers do not need a capitalist government of the present ruling parties, or the opposition SJB or JVP, or any other party that will implement IMF austerity. They need a workers' and peasants' government that will implement the above program.

The Democratic and Socialist Congress would prepare and mobilise the revolutionary power of the working class to overthrow the capitalist state and pave way for a workers' and peasants' government.

Sri Lankan workers should also understand that in this fight they need to unite with their international class brothers and sisters as part of an internationally coordinated struggle against the economic domination of global capitalism, imperialist war and the danger of a nuclear conflagration. Action committees in Sri Lanka must be coordinated with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

We urge workers and youth: Join the SEP to fight for this revolutionary program.



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