

Sri Lanka: Oppose the government's price hikes!

By the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Workers and the rural masses in Sri Lanka confront a common struggle with their counterparts globally against the agenda of austerity being imposed by governments internationally. Working people are being forced to bear the burden of the worsening crisis of world capitalism to ensure the profits of international finance capital.

On February 11, to meet the International Monetary Fund's demands, the Rajapakse government announced a series of drastic price increases—kerosene by 49.3 percent, petrol by 8.7 percent and diesel by 36.9 percent—impacting on working people and small businesses throughout the island.

The fuel price rises are part of a Greek-style austerity program being imposed by President Mahinda Rajapakse, including currency devaluation, cuts to public spending and other price rises, such as a 20 to 40 percent increase in electricity tariffs. For workers and the poor, this assault on living standards, coming after decades of war and deprivation, is intolerable.

Strikes and protests have already erupted among fishermen, bus owners, students and plantation workers, and have been met with state repression. As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has repeatedly warned, the police-state apparatus built up in decades of communal war against the Tamil minority is now being turned on working people—Sinhala and Tamil alike—who are seeking to defend their basic rights.

The government is responsible for the police attack on protesting fishermen in Chilaw on February 15 that claimed the life of Antony Warnakulasuriya. The security forces also mounted operations involving hundreds of police, armed with batons, tear gas and water cannon, to break up separate protest rallies organised by the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Well aware of the events in the Middle East over the past year, President Rajapakse is fearful that any protest will become the starting point of a mass movement against his regime and the bankrupt profit system it protects. His government will stop at nothing to crush any opposition, as it did during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The most sustained protests so far have been by fishermen, whose livelihoods have been devastated by the hikes in fuel costs. When private bus owners, mainly small operators, went on strike February 13 to demand fuel subsidies, the government rejected their demand but did allow fare increases of 20-28 percent. Fishermen, however, are not in a position to raise their prices—that would mean lower sales and income.

The SEP unreservedly supports the protest actions by all sections of working people and youth against the attacks on their social and democratic rights. At the same time, we insist that protests, however militant and self-sacrificing, are not sufficient to defeat the social counter-revolution perpetrated by the ruling classes and their governments. The working class can defend its interests based only on a program that tackles the source of these attacks—the capitalist system itself.

The fight for the independent mobilisation of workers on a socialist perspective necessarily involves a political struggle against all those who defend the status quo—the opposition parties, union bureaucracies and pseudo-radicals. These layers seek to confine any opposition to futile appeals to the government to “sympathetically consider” the demands of the people. But like governments in Europe, Rajapakse's regime has no choice but to impose the dictates of the IMF and finance capital.

The UNP and JVP do not oppose the IMF's agenda.

The UNP was responsible for initiating the shift to pro-market restructuring and privatisation in the late 1970s, as well as for launching the war against the LTTE in 1983. The JVP, which fully backed the war, joined a coalition government with Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 2004 and helped impose its capitalist program. The JVP at its rally blamed government "corruption and waste", not capitalism, for the attacks on working people.

The ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) are now playing the politically criminal role of promoting the right-wing UNP as a defender of the rights of workers and the poor. NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne joined UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe at a Colombo protest demonstration on February 17 and called on people to rally around "this common platform and oppose this criminal government's anti-people attacks."

The SEP is fighting for the mobilisation of workers, independent of all factions of the ruling class, to rally the urban and rural masses in the fight to replace the Rajapakse government with a workers' and farmers' government and a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam. Without fighting for a socialist alternative to the decadent capitalist order, working people cannot defend their living standards and basic democratic rights.

The struggle for socialism is an international issue, today more than ever. Working people and youth throughout the world face the common enemy of capitalism. Workers in Sri Lanka find themselves in the same battle as their class brothers in Egypt, Greece and around the globe. Any fight against the austerity agenda in Sri Lanka is part of the developing international wave of revolutionary struggles.

To develop a political struggle against the Rajapakse government, the SEP calls on workers, the urban and rural poor, youth and professionals to build independent Action Committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods. This response must include defensive measures, including the formation of defence guards, to protect the democratic rights of assembly and freedom of expression, which are under direct attack by the government.

The SEP pledges to politically assist these Action Committees in waging a fight against the IMF's agenda. At the same time, we will seek to educate

workers and youth in the necessity of basing such struggles on a scientific program derived from the entire history of the struggle by the Trotskyist movement for Marxism in South Asia and internationally.

The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, calls on thoughtful workers and youth to consider our program, and apply to join and build the world party of socialist revolution.

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