

Sri Lanka: A socialist program to fight evictions and defend the right to housing

the Socialist Equality Party
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Announced on January 29, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's so-called Megapolis and Western Development Project aims to drive thousands of poverty-stricken families from their homes and hand the land over to local and foreign investors.

Launched under the bogus claim of "providing proper housing," the program is an even more ruthless attack on the poor than that carried out by previous the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. To create the political conditions for this attack, the big business media has begun a vicious campaign slandering slum dwellers as "underworld thugs" and "drug addicts."

Most of Colombo's slum dwellers do not have permanent employment. Numerous surveys reveal that their daily income is below \$US2 (300 rupees), with some earning less than a dollar a day. In addition to being forced into dwellings without any basic amenities, the poor will be deprived of welfare services. Their problems cannot be separated from the issues facing tens of thousands of urban and rural workers now under attack from Sri Lanka's ruling elite.

According to Megapolis and Western Development Minister Champika Ranawaka, about 68,000 low-income houses will be demolished and their owners given dwellings in high-rise apartment blocks. Residents renting homes or living without proper documentation will be considered "illegal settlers" and forcibly evicted.

- On 12 February, the Coast Conservation Department cleared hundreds of houses deemed to be "unauthorised constructions" along the coastline from

the Wellawatta to Mt. Lavinia. In the face of intense resistance from residents, the government deployed its notorious police commandos or Special Task Force to the area.

- On 16 February, about 250 houses in the "Kajeema Watte" area in Ferguson Rd, Thotalanga in Colombo North were demolished by Urban Development Authority (UDA) officers and the police. Residents' furniture and their children's school equipment were crushed in several cases.

- On 16 March, 10 houses were destroyed by heavy machinery in the "Apple Watte" area of Thotalanga.

- UDA director, Brigadier S. A. R. Samarasinghe, has threatened to eliminate about 80 houses in Colombo North, near the L.S. Gunapala Silva ground.

- Poor families living in Slave Island, Wanathamulla, Borella and Obeysekarapura in Colombo, also face eviction. Large swathes of land in these areas are to be handed over to profit-hungry investors. India's TATA Group and Pakistan's Imperial Builders have already been given 99-year leases for 8 acres (3.2 ha) and 3 acres (1.2 ha) respectively in the Slave Island area.

Colombo's slum communities emerged during British rule and continued after the transfer of power in 1948 to Sri Lanka's local capitalist elite. Poverty and social conditions in these areas have grown harsher year by year. The present Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration aims to drive these oppressed communities into the streets, pushing them into destitution.

In line with former President Rajapakse's vow to make Colombo a major South Asian commercial centre, the Wickremasinghe-Sirisena regime has expanded this project to include the Western Province.

During a March 2 media briefing, Megapolis and Western Development Minister Ranawaka declared

that 23 areas would be “developed” under the project this year, including Kaduwela, Maharagama, Enderamulla, Homagama, Kottawa, Pandura, Gongithota, Meerigama, and Horana. Poor and lower middle-class households in these areas will be subjected to the sort of evictions already seen in Colombo. The majority of evicted families have not received any housing. The small number of flats that have been made available are unsuitable and lack basic facilities.

As last year’s Center for Policy Alternatives (CPA) survey noted: “The intention behind the hasty resettlement of people in these flats was not the wellbeing of the evicted occupants but making land with premium real estate values available for business.” The CPA estimated between 280,000 and 500,000 residents will be displaced by the program.

Evicted residents offered dwellings have to pay 50,000 rupees upfront, another 50,000 rupees within three months and between 2,500 and 3,800 rupees rent per month. Water bills are paid to the UDA at significantly higher rates than standard Water Board rates. The flats are poorly constructed. Less than a year after they were built, they already have cracks in the walls and floors.

University of Colombo Sociology Professor Siri Hettige told the *Mirror Citizen* web site in May 2014 that more than 50 percent of Colombo’s population were low-income families. “What is happening today is not settling them in suitable housing,” he said, “but destroying the houses they have built and expropriating the commercially valuable lands. Because their livelihoods cannot be carried out in multi-storey flats, these [new] homes do not suit them.”

Engineer Tudor Wijenayake told the same web site that because only 25 percent of slum dwellers have legal ownership of their residences, they had no housing security. “There’s no doubt that Colombo’s poor areas need significantly higher public amenities.”

Like its predecessor, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is imposing its so-called development project under World Bank directives and the dictates of international finance capital. Rajapakse’s land-grabbing evictions gave priority to Chinese investors. The current administration is working closely with Indian and American investors.

The eviction of low-income residents in Colombo

and the Western Province is part of an all-round government assault on workers, youth and every oppressed layer of the population. Facing a grave balance of payment crisis, the government has been in negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a \$US1.5 billion loan by end of this month. Any deal will involve even greater social attacks.

Under these conditions, claims by the Sinhala-chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) that the government can be pressured to solve the housing crisis are a political diversion and a lie. Likewise, the insistence of the Frontline Socialist Party—a breakaway from the JVP—that the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government can be forced to make certain concessions to the slum dwellers.

The bankruptcy of FSP claims is illustrated by its student wing, the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF). It opposes students turning to the working class in the fight against government attacks on education but engages in empty protests that make students targets of police brutality.

The only way to defeat the escalating government assault on slum dwellers and low-income families in Colombo city and the Western Province is as part of a unified struggle of the working class and all oppressed layers, independently of capitalist and pseudo-left parties, and on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Those facing eviction must come forward to build action committees involving all sections of the working class and in defence of the democratic right to decent, high quality homes. This struggle has to be developed as part of the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government that places the banks and real estate and housing industries under the democratic control of the working class to implement programs that provide for all basic social rights and needs.

To fight for this socialist program, we call on workers and youth to join the Socialist Equality Party to build it as a mass revolutionary party.

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