

Fight for a socialist solution to the political crisis in Sri Lanka

By the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Bitter political infighting has erupted as competing factions of the Sri Lankan ruling elite grab for state power following the political coup of October 26 by President Maithripala Sirisena.

One faction centred on the United National Party (UNP) is led by Ranil Wickremesinghe who was sacked as prime minister last Friday. The other is based on the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) headed by the president and former president Mahinda Rajapakse who was installed as prime minister by Sirisena.

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) calls on the working class to reject all of these capitalist parties and to mobilise independently to fight for its own class interests. No one should have any illusion that these venal representatives of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie will defend democratic and social rights. Whichever party or parties finally emerge on top will deepen the assault on the living conditions of working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—and brutally suppress any resistance.

The SEP calls on workers and youth to rally to its banner and fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on an international socialist program to defend the democratic and social rights of the working class, youth and the urban and rural poor.

Sirisena's unconstitutional action in sacking Wickremesinghe is the culmination of a protracted decay of parliamentary rule since Sri Lanka was given so-called "independence" in 1948. The political coup is an acute expression in Sri Lanka of the worsening global economic crisis, sharpening geo-political tensions, particularly between the US and China, and the resurgence of class struggles internationally.

In his televised speech to the nation on Sunday, Sirisena tried to justify his anti-democratic move by declaring it was necessary to "protect the noble expectation of good governance" that was being destroyed by the sacked prime minister. Wickremesinghe responded in a speech on Monday by claiming that democracy had been blooming under his government. He warned that the UNP would not allow a "flourishing dictatorship" to emerge and would fight to the hilt to defend "parliamentary democracy."

What lies and hypocrisy! During the 2015 presidential election, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe shared a platform denouncing Rajapakse's autocratic rule and promising "good

governance" and better living conditions. These slogans were just a cover for a regime-change conspiracy orchestrated by the US to oust Rajapakse who was regarded as too close to China.

Neither faction of the ruling class defends the basic democratic rights of working people. Parliament has always been a smokescreen behind which the bourgeoisie ruthlessly advances its class interests at the expense of workers and the poor. Now this facade is being dropped even as the rival parties declare their fealty to "democracy."

The Sri Lankan economy is mired in a profound crisis that stems from the 2008 global financial collapse. The Rajapakse government took out huge loans to fund massive expenditure on its intensified communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which devastated the lives of the Tamil masses in the north and east. At the same time, it imposed the burden on working people as a whole by implementing the IMF's demands for savage cuts to social services and price subsidies.

Having ousted Rajapakse in 2015, the "national unity" government, with Sirisena as president and Wickremesinghe as prime minister, realigned Sri Lanka's foreign policy towards Washington and continued to impose the IMF's austerity program. When working people organised strikes and protests, the government did not hesitate to use the police and military to suppress them.

Amid this mounting popular opposition and deepening financial crisis, the "unity" government began to come apart as Sirisena and Wickremesinghe blamed each other for their huge losses in the February local elections. At the same time, they both accommodated themselves to the vicious Sinhala chauvinist campaign being whipped up by Rajapakse in his new bid for power.

The resistance to the government's attacks on living conditions has been widespread among different sections of workers as well as farmers, fishermen and students who have begun to link up across ethnic lines.

Significantly, two days before Sirisena's political coup, 5,000 young workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—gathered in Colombo to support the wage struggle of hundreds of thousands of striking plantation workers. The protest sent shockwaves through the ruling elite with editorials expressing

alarm that young workers were organising through social media for the first time.

Whatever their factional differences, the entire ruling class fears a unified movement of the working class and rural masses. For all their posturing about “democracy,” whichever parties win out in the current bitter power struggle will use the full force of the police state apparatus built up in 30 years of brutal communal war to suppress the opposition of working people.

Already there is a push in corporate circles for a strongman to impose their dictates. At a recent gathering of Sri Lanka’s International Chamber of Commerce, a top CEO Ashok Parthirage, with the agreement of others present, declared: “We need a strong leadership; what we need is a little bit of a dictator. There are two parties who are governing today, but nobody is making decisions.”

Since formal independence in 1948, successive UNP and SLFP led governments have graphically demonstrated the incapacity of the bourgeoisie to address the democratic aspirations and pressing social needs of working people. The limited concessions made in the 1940s and 1950s to head off the opposition of workers and the poor have been gutted or completely destroyed. Moreover, the parties and trade unions that led these struggles—above all, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—are now firmly part of the political establishment.

For decades, the stock-in-trade of Colombo politicians has been anti-Tamil chauvinism to buttress bourgeois rule by dividing the working class. This vile communal politics ultimately led to the 30-year war with devastating consequences for working people as a whole. The SEP warns that workers and youth cannot take a step forward without opposing all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, including the Tamil communalism of parties such as the Tamil National Alliance, and unifying to defend their common class interests.

The SEP also makes a particular warning against the political demagogues and charlatans of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which, in the midst of the current crisis, is seeking to exploit the widespread hostility towards both of the major bourgeois parties—the UNP and SLFP. The JVP’s declaration that it supports neither party is a sham. The JVP, as part of the Colombo political establishment, has shamelessly manoeuvred between the two parties, joining an SLFP government in 2005, and backing the “national unity” government in 2015. It is doing the same today, appealing for “people’s power,” not to fight for the rights of working people, let alone socialism, but to leverage a deal with one or other of the bourgeois parties.

The current political crisis is also exposing the charade of formal independence. All of the bourgeois political parties in Sri Lanka, including the JVP, are pawns in the intensifying rivalries between major powers that are leading to a devastating war. The Chinese president has welcomed the return to power of Rajapakse, while the US and its allies are backing

Wickremesinghe’s call for the reconvening of parliament, which he calculates will strengthen his claim to the prime ministership.

The US has transformed the Indo-Pacific region into a diplomatic, economic and military battleground, coercing countries to line up against China in preparation for war. For its part, China has no progressive solution and is seeking to use its economic influence to counter the US, while engaging in its own arms build-up. In Sri Lanka and throughout the region, the ruling classes are placing their peoples on the front line of a war between two nuclear-armed powers that can only end in a catastrophe for humanity.

The past seven decades of capitalist rule in Sri Lanka has thoroughly vindicated the principles of Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution. Trotsky warned that the ruling class in countries of a belated capitalist development is incapable of addressing basic democratic issues, including independence from imperialism and of establishing equal rights for minorities and decent living conditions for all. Only the working class, in a political struggle against all factions of the bourgeoisie, can rally the rural poor and oppressed masses to carry out the tasks of the democratic revolution and implement socialist policies as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only party that fights for this political perspective and program. We urge the working class to take stock of the political situation and to chart its own independent course based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution.

Workers must take the initiative in forming independent action committees in workplaces, neighbourhoods and estates, mobilising the support of the rural poor and youth to fight for their democratic rights and class interests. The struggle for democracy is bound up with the question of state power and the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

None of the problems facing working people, above all the danger of world war, can be resolved within Sri Lanka. What is required is the building of a unified movement of the working class internationally. The SEP calls for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral component of the struggle for a federation of South Asian socialist republics. We urge workers, youth and intellectuals to join and build the SEP as the revolutionary party of the working class necessary to fight for this perspective.

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