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The international significance of the developing revolutionary confrontation in Sri Lanka

Eight months after a mass uprising chased Sri Lanka's hated President Gotabhaya Rajapakse from power, the working class is coming into headlong confrontation with his successor, the notorious IMF-enforcer and pro-US imperialist stooge, Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Today half a million workers, including petroleum, electricity, water supply and health care workers, will join a one-day general strike to protest the Wickremesinghe government's savage austerity program and sweeping attacks on democratic rights. In addition, hundreds of thousands of teachers and other government employees and public sector workers will voice their opposition to IMF austerity by joining lunch-time pickets and other protests.

In the face of Wickremesinghe's order Monday night expanding the draconian anti-strike provisions of the Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) to new sections of the working class, several unions, including those representing port workers, canceled their participation in today's planned walkout at the last minute. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of workers will strike in direct defiance of the government's criminalization of job actions under the EPSA and its threats of fines, two- to five-year jail terms and loss of professional status.

Having been elevated to the presidency as the result of a ruling class conspiracy, Wickremesinghe is resorting to evermore brazen authoritarian measures to impose sweeping cuts to public services, mass public sector job cuts, punishing electricity hikes and tax increases and wholesale privatization.

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Last week, in flagrant violation of the constitution and the democratic rights of the Sri Lankan people, Wickremesinghe canceled the island-wide local elections to be held March 9. The results of the local election would have had no direct impact on the legal parliamentary standing of Wickremesinghe's government. But he rightly calculated that the government's impending mass repudiation at the polls would have underlined that it has no popular support and is utterly illegitimate.

On Sunday, the government mobilized thousands of heavily armed police to attack a demonstration organized by the JVP to protest Wickremesinghe's scrapping of the local elections. The police violence resulted in the death of one protester, a JVP candidate, and the hospitalization of more than a dozen more.

Wickremesinghe has arrogantly declared that elections must await "economic recovery"—by which he means intensifying the exploitation of Sri Lanka's workers and toilers to the point at which debt payments to the vultures of global capital can be resumed—and that "economic recovery" demands "public order." He has repeatedly decried last year's popular upsurge, ordered the arrest of protest leaders under anti-terrorism laws and vowed he will not allow the country to succumb to "anarchy."

He and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie clearly see even the most truncated of democratic rights as providing a potentially dangerous avenue for the emergence of mass opposition, and they are girding themselves to use the full force of the capitalist state—from the autocratic powers of Sri Lanka's executive presidency and the courts to the police and army—to suppress a new eruption of working class struggle.

The working class and rural masses for their part cannot endure the never-ending burdens being placed on them as inflation continues to rise at over 50 percent. With more than a third of Sri Lankans forced to reduce their number of daily meals, hunger, malnutrition and outright starvation stalk the island.

Initially, Wickremesinghe was able to exploit the confusion and disappointment among broad sections of working people over the failure of last year's four-month mass upsurge—its militancy and breadth notwithstanding—to bring about any substantive change. With the complicity of the opposition parties and the trade unions, the government retook the offensive, pushing through a raft of scorched earth IMF-dictated measures.

But now everything—including the government's increasing resort to authoritarian measures—points to the resurgence of mass working class opposition. Fearing that this opposition will escape their control, some union leaders, including Wasantha

Samarasinghe, the head of the Inter-Company Employees Union and a JVP leader, have demagogically mused about the possibility of an unlimited general strike.

Under these conditions of extreme class tension, the struggle of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), for the working class to become an independent political force, rallying the rural masses behind it in the fight for a program of democratic and socialist demands based on the needs of the masses, not what the political representatives of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie claim is “affordable,” becomes all the more urgent.

From the very beginning of last year’s mass upsurge, the SEP fought to free the working class from the grip of the pro-capitalist trade unions, which initially strove to prevent workers from intervening as a class through strikes and other job actions, then sanctioned one-day protest strikes while promoting the bourgeois opposition’s call for an interim capitalist government that would be no less committed to IMF austerity.

The SEP fights to unite the working class across communal lines and to develop its independent initiative through the building of action committees, independent of the unions and all the political representatives of the ruling class. These committees are and must become the means for mobilizing ever wider sections of the working class and rural toilers to oppose the attacks of the ruling class on social and democratic rights and for the development of the struggle for workers’ power.

In July, just days after Rajapakse had been forced to flee the country and as the ruling class was maneuvering to make over the government to fashion a more effective instrument for imposing IMF austerity and safeguarding its vast wealth, the SEP initiated the struggle for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. Based on their own action committees, the SEP explained, the Congress will embody “a revolutionary political alternative to the reactionary capitalist interim government being set up by the discredited parliamentary cronies of Gotabhaya Rajapakse and Ranil Wickremesinghe—his successor as executive president and would-be autocrat.”

The SEP is boldly intervening in today’s mass strike to arm the working class with this strategy. In a statement published in Sinhala entitled “Support the strike against the government’s austerity attacks! Withdraw draconian essential service orders! Fight for the socialist program to defend social and democratic rights!” the SEP declares, “There is no solution for the workers and poor within the capitalist system. The building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses ... is evermore urgent to

develop a counteroffensive against the class war program of the Wickremesinghe government.”

The statement indicts the trade unions, JVP and pseudo-left organizations for tying the working class to bankrupt Sri Lanka capitalism and its putrefied democratic institutions with their claims that IMF austerity can be made palatable through appeals to Wickremesinghe to see reason or by a change of government.

In response to Wickremesinghe’s cancelation of the local elections, the JVP, along with other bourgeois opposition parties, has appealed for the intervention of the Western powers. That is, they are promoting as guardians of democracy the US and European imperialist powers, who are relentlessly escalating their war on Russia, are the biggest advocates of IMF austerity, and supported the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan state in its three-decade-long civil war against the Tamil minority. The US, it needs be added, is ruthlessly exploiting Sri Lanka’s financial crisis to harness the island still more completely to its preparations to wage war on China.

The SEP statement outlines a series of socialist and democratic demands that articulate the needs of the masses and can serve as focal points for their independent mobilization. These include: the abolition of the executive presidency; the establishment of workers’ democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential goods; and the repeal of all IMF austerity measures and repudiation of the foreign debts incurred by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

It then explains that the Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses “with democratically elected representatives from action committees of workers and rural toilers throughout the country will decide the course of action to fight for the above demands. Thus it will lay the foundation for a workers-peasants government committed to a socialist program.”

The developing confrontation between revolution and counterrevolution in Sri Lanka is both a harbinger and a warning to workers around the world.

Everywhere the ruling class is utterly impervious to the needs of the population. In the imperialist centers of Europe and North America, the ruling class is embarking on a new wave of sweeping attacks on what remains of the social rights of the working class in order to fund its war against Russia and already far advanced preparations for war with China. And in the face of mounting social opposition, it is moving to criminalize working class resistance with anti-strike laws and other attacks on democratic rights and cultivating fascist forces to serve as auxiliaries of police state repression.

To assert its class interests, defend its democratic rights, oppose imperialist war and unite its struggles across state borders and continents, the working class must cut through the straitjacket in which the nationalist-corporatist union bureaucracies have so long confined it by building new organizations of struggle.

The transformation of the working class into a political power, the protagonist of a new social order and the unification of its struggles, above all, demands the building of a revolutionary party rooted in the lessons of history—the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky, and its national sections in Sri Lanka and throughout the world.

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