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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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11.05.2022

Sri Lankan workers defy curfew, government-organised violence

A government-organised attack yesterday by armed thugs on Sri Lankan protesters encamped on Galle Face Green in central Colombo was meant to set the stage for a far broader crackdown on the month-long anti-government protest movement. It has backfired.



Medical students joined by workers protesting at Ragama on May 9, 2022 against the attack at Galle Face [Photo: WSWS]

Using the violent attack as the pretext, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse imposed an indefinite nationwide curfew and mobilised the military, sending armed troops to Galle Face Green to bolster the heavy police presence already on hand.

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Far from suppressing the opposition, thousands of people angered by the violent attack defied the curfew and heavy police-military build-up to flood into Galle Face to demonstrate their solidarity with the anti-government protests. Across the island, hundreds of thousands reportedly took to the streets to do the same.

Sections of workers, including health workers at the National Hospital in Colombo and postal workers, stopped work spontaneously to take a stand against the government's actions.

Mass protests have been taking place across Sri Lanka over the past month demanding the resignation of the president and his government and an end to the social disaster facing working people due to skyrocketing prices, lengthy power outages, and shortages of essentials, including basic food items, fuel and medicines.



People line up to buy kerosene at Kandana, a Colombo suburb, on May 9, 2022. [Photo: WSWS]

Working people are compelled to wait in queues for hours and even days. Many are having increasing difficulty in providing food for their families and are reducing the number of meals each day. There is a worsening breakdown of essential services. Hospitals are running out of medicines and equipment. Transport is becoming prohibitively expensive.

The groundswell of opposition in the working class has compelled the trade unions, which initially did nothing, to call one-day general strikes on April 28 and again last Friday. The

strike on Friday—supplemented by what is known as a hartal, a general shutdown of small businesses—brought the economy to a halt. Millions of workers throughout the island stopped working, including in the free enterprise zones, hospitals, schools, public administration, and transport.

The strike was especially significant as working people unified across communal lines—Sinhala and Tamil, Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists—around their common class interests. For decades, especially in times of crisis, Colombo politicians have whipped up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism and organised communal provocations and pogroms to divide workers against each other.

The powerful support for the general strike and hartal sent a shiver of fear through the entire political establishment—government and opposition alike as well as the trade unions, which were clearly shocked at the extent of support.

Late on Friday night, President Rajapakse, who already has the extensive powers of the executive presidency, imposed a state of emergency enabling him to mobilise the military, impose curfews and censorship, make arbitrary arrests and ban strikes and protests.

As the government prepared to mobilise the military, the trade unions called off an indefinite general strike due to start this Wednesday, replaced with limited lunch-time protests by workers. By demobilising the working class, the trade unions only encouraged a desperate government to act.

The prime minister, Mahinda Rajapakse, the president's brother, yesterday assembled hundreds of ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) supporters, many of them bussed in from other parts of the island, to his official residence in central Colombo. After a deliberately inflammatory speech, they were sent out armed with sticks and clubs, firstly to attack protesters outside the residence and then those occupying Galle Face Green about a kilometre down the road.

The police, although armed with tear gas and water cannon, did nothing to stop them until the rampage on Galle Face Green was complete. More than a hundred people were hospitalised with injuries caused by the thugs.



Masses at Galle Face after the attack on May 9, 2022 [Photo: WSWS]

What the Rajapakse brothers did not count on was the angry reaction of broad layers of the population who were prepared to defy the curfew and the security forces. As the extent of the opposition became apparent, Mahinda Rajapakse tendered his resignation as prime minister, effectively dissolving the cabinet.

President Rajapakse has now called on all parliamentary parties—government and opposition—to form a “national unity government” to find solutions to the country’s unprecedented economic and political crisis. The country faces an acute foreign exchange crisis, meaning it has very limited funds to buy imports including fuel, and has declared “a temporary default” on its large foreign loans. The International Monetary Fund has insisted on draconian austerity conditions for an emergency bailout loan that will only worsen the social crisis facing working people.

The entire Colombo political establishment—the opposition parties, the trade unions, corporate representatives and media commentators—is pinning its hopes on the formation of an interim or national unity or all-party government to find some way to demobilise or suppress the protests of workers, youth and rural masses.

To date, the main opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have insisted that the president has to resign before they will consider joining or supporting an interim government to prepare for early elections. Under the impact of the events of the past few days, they may well reconsider. Undoubtedly

behind closed doors, frantic discussions are taking place in ruling circles to patch together such a government.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka has warned workers not to place their faith in any capitalist interim government. The opposition SJB and JVP have a track record of imposing the austerity dictates of the IMF and will do so again, just as ruthlessly as the current Rajapakse regime, if given a chance.

The violent attack on anti-government protesters underscores the urgency of the SEP's call for workers to form action committees, independent of the trade unions, in workplaces, plantations and working-class suburbs throughout the island to mount a unified campaign for their class interests.

The SEP has elaborated a series of demands on which these action committees can fight to ensure that resources are used to fulfil the pressing needs of working people not to satisfy the profit demands of the super-rich. These include taking control of the production and distribution of essential goods, price controls and measures against price gouging, the indexation of wages against inflation, the defence of jobs and the repudiation of all foreign debts.

The formation of a network of action committees and the fight for these demands leads inexorably to the political struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to restructure society along socialist lines. The crisis in Sri Lanka demonstrates in the sharpest form the incompatibility of even the most elementary needs of the working class with the profit system.

World Socialist 10.05.2022