

May Day amidst global mayhem

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As we pass this May Day, we are witnessing a disintegrating global order. Over seventy developing countries are in debt distress and several of them have defaulted on their debt. A broken international financial system is escalating economic crises. Climate shocks are undermining the food system. Food insecurity and malnutrition are on the rise. Over the past many months, we have seen the world fall apart in Palestine. While the horrors of the bombings and deaths in Gaza shake us, the solidarity expressed from different parts of the world is a glimmer of hope. The protests in universities in the US, the belly of the beast that unconditionally backs Israel, are encouraging. May Day is as much about internationalist solidarity against oppression as it is about working people's daily lives. Global justice is inextricably linked to our local struggles, and our resistance against these oppressive structures needs to broaden beyond our particular interests.

Working People

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka is devastating the working masses. Over the past two years, over half a million formal sector workers lost their jobs, real wages have halved, and garments and estate workers earn below poverty wages. Close to half the value of the retirement funds of formal sector workers will be lost due to Domestic Debt Restructuring foisted by the Government. Trade unions are raising some concerns of the workers affected by the crisis. Yet, the working masses in our country form a larger mass, and bringing together those toiling in the towns and countryside has remained the challenge for decades.

Fisherfolk, peasants, and daily wage workers comprise the larger part of the rural economy, and their economic lives are different from the regular income earners of the formal sector. The economic crisis and the austerity measures are undermining rural livelihoods resulting in reduced food production. The fallout of the fertilizer ban, the market pricing of energy leading to drastic increases in fuel prices and the cuts to various subsidies have severely impacted small-scale farmers and fisher folk. Day wage earners are without work as construction work has come to a halt and other producers shy from hiring wage labour.

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Rural North

In the Northern Province where we work, there are rumblings of demands in the countryside. A few months ago, hundreds of Northern and Southern fisher folk came together in Jaffna with the following demands: reject the Draft Fisheries Act, ban fishing licenses for foreign commercial fishing vessels, reduce and halt the import of seafood affecting local fishing livelihoods, ensure policies and allocations to rebuild fishing livelihoods, and find a solution to the Palk Bay fishing conflict.

Recent discussions with farmers in Kilinochchi illustrated debilitated livelihoods with the economic crisis. Small farmers have unpredictable incomes and many of them are also suffocating by increased rent for the land they cultivate; the curse of share-cropping continues to this day. With the Government no longer supplying inputs, farmers are at the mercy of private shops setting unaffordable prices. The rising cost of electricity and kerosene for irrigation, and diesel for ploughing, have drastically increased their cost of production. With few avenues for marketing and prices fluctuating with imports into the country, many farmers are pushed into selling their produce at rock-bottom prices to private traders.

In Jaffna last week, many activists, cooperative members and researchers came together to take stock of the rising number of people disconnected from the electricity grid. Most families are struggling to pay their monthly electricity bills due to reduced cash incomes. In spite of government constantly citing electricity as an essential service of the state to bar strike action, it is being denied to larger sections of the citizenry. Indeed, one million households have been disconnected from the electricity grid.

Solidarity and Resistance

The solidarities we form with May Day need to go beyond our narrow interests. The working people as a whole have to come together, not only for the working conditions and wages in each sector, but also for the livelihoods, food and welfare of all. The workers, the fisher folk, the farmers, the day wage labourers and all those who earn a living must come together in resistance. It is such solidarity that can challenge the powerful forces within and outside the country that keep us down.

As the authoritarian Sri Lankan Government works with the IMF and the World Bank to suppress working people, the working class and the rural folk in the towns and the countryside must come together to fight against these oppressive forces and their crippling austerity measures. The debt-distressed nations of the global South must come together to eschew the bondholders and extractive creditors. People around the world must come out in solidarity to struggle for Peace, Justice, Freedom and Equality.