

Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party to contest general election

23 August 2000

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), has decided to contest the general election scheduled for October 10.

The SEP will field candidates in the Colombo district, a major working class centre comprising all the various communities in the country. In opposition to the main bourgeois parties and the so-called “left” political organisations, the SEP will present a program to unite Sinhala and Tamil workers, the oppressed masses, youth and intellectuals, end the 17-year-old bloody civil war, defend democratic rights and solve the burning social questions on the island, such as unemployment, the erosion of living standards, the deterioration of education and health services.

Standing for the first time as an officially recognised party, the SEP is putting forward a slate of 23 candidates for the Colombo district, led by SEP general secretary Wijie Dias. Such a slate is required under the country's electoral system of proportional representation.

Official recognition only came last May, 32 years after the SEP's founding and following a long campaign to achieve that right. It means that the SEP will now have access to free television and broadcasting rights, providing it with an opportunity to present its policies to a far wider audience than ever before.

The election is being held at a critical juncture in the post-war history of the island. The Sri Lankan state has been plunged into deep crisis following a series of defeats suffered since last April at the hands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who are fighting for a separate state for the Tamil minority in the north and east of the island.

The central election issue will be how to end the 17-year long civil war. The ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and the opposition United National Party (UNP) are leaning upon racist and Buddhist groups to whip up Sinhala chauvinism and cloud the real issues confronting the masses. Both the PA and the UNP have supported the devolution of limited powers to regional bodies, including in the Tamil-dominated North and East of the country. But far from resolving the crisis, the plan to carve out regions on an ethnic basis will only bring further tensions and open the way for “ethnic cleansing” of minority populations in the different provinces.

The PA and UNP hope that some form of devolution will enable them to strike a deal with the Tamil bourgeois parties, isolate the LTTE and thereby meet the demands of the major Western powers, India and large sections of Sri Lankan big business for an end to the war. At the same time, both parties are seeking support from the Sinhala chauvinist organisations, which are demanding a “real war to the finish.”

In opposition to the two main capitalist parties and their chauvinist allies, the SEP advances an alternative socialist program for the unification of the Sinhalese, Tamil and Tamil Muslim masses as the only means of ending the war on a progressive basis and meeting the democratic and social aspirations of the majority of ordinary people.

For PA leader President Chandrika Kumaratunga the elections represent a desperate bid to gain the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed to push through the constitutional proposals on devolution which she was forced to withdraw earlier this month. Failing that, the PA, if it is returned

to office, may convene parliament as a “constituent assembly” to push through its proposals by means of a simple majority.

While it refused to back the PA's devolution package in parliament, the UNP is under international and domestic pressure to advance a settlement. However it is also seeking to attract the support of the Sinhala chauvinists in the election. This two-track policy sees it joining with openly racist organisations like the “Movement for the Defence of the Motherland” to campaign against the PA's devolution package while calling for a consensus with other parties to find a political settlement to the war.

The military advances made by LTTE forces over the past 12 months have brought a frenzied response from the fascistic and racist organisations. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front—JVP) has dropped the democratic and socialist rhetoric it adopted in the recent past. It has revived the “Defend the Motherland” slogan under which it campaigned in the late 1980s, when it carried out fascist-style murders of trade unionists, workers and leaders of other political parties.

Defectors from the UNP, the PA and the JVP have joined forces to form the Sihala Urumaya Party (Sinhala Heritage Party—SUP), which has launched a campaign on the streets to demand a “real war”. This racist organisation opposes any democratic rights for the Tamil masses, insisting that they must be forcibly subjugated to the Sinhala Buddhist state.

The present political crisis arises not merely out of the military defeats suffered by the PA regime in the recent period. It represents the culmination of the policies pursued by the bourgeois parties over the past half century. Ever since it was handed power by its British colonial masters in 1948, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has lived in fear of the working class and peasant masses.

Consequently it has pursued a chauvinist policy, based on Sinhala Buddhist ideology, aimed at dividing them along racial and ethnic lines.

Almost the very first act of the incoming government in 1948 was the elimination of citizenship rights of the Tamil plantation workers. This was followed by the Sinhala only policy in 1956 and the 1972 constitution enshrining Buddhism as the state religion.

But the “divide and rule” program of the bourgeoisie could never have proceeded without the progressive abandonment by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) of its socialist program—aimed at uniting the Sinhala and Tamil masses—during the course of the 1950s, culminating in the decision to join the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in a coalition government in 1964.

The betrayal of the LSSP led to the growth of nationalist and separatist tendencies among the Tamil working class and middle class on one side, and the intensification of Sinhala chauvinism on the other, with the former socialists of the LSSP now among its chief proponents.

When ongoing discrimination led to the emergence of armed separatist organisations, in particular the LTTE, the response of the UNP regime in Colombo was to launch a war against the Tamil masses in 1983. The chauvinist anti-Tamil hysteria was also used to effect decisive changes in the south, as the UNP regime established an authoritarian executive presidency, attacked the living conditions of the working class, abandoned

the previous program of national economic development and opened the economy up for penetration by international capital.

The more their policies have come into conflict with the needs and interests of the broad masses, the more successive bourgeois regimes—both UNP and PA—have spilled the blood of Tamils and Sinhalese alike. In the killing fields of the north and east it is estimated that 60,000 have died, while up to 100,000 have been killed in the south. Almost the entire population of the northeast region has become refugees, 90 percent of them living below the poverty line facing death, epidemics, hunger and persecution, while 500,000 have been forced to flee the country.

Thousands of unemployed rural youth have been used as cannon fodder for the war. The cost of living index has gone up by 1,066 points since the beginning of PA rule in 1994. Social polarisation has deepened, with the poorest 40 percent of the population receiving only 15.30 percent of national income, while the richest 20 percent enjoy 49.90 percent, according to 1996-97 official figures. The number of poor was 5.4 million in 1970-72. By 1996-97 it had risen to 8.6 million. The suicide rate, at 22 per day, is one of the highest in the world. And such figures only touch on the social impact of capitalist rule.

In the last three months alone, the PA has doubled defense expenditure by 48 billion rupees (\$615 million) while driving the cost of living figure up by 115 points. The country has been placed on a “war footing” with sweeping emergency laws attacking democratic rights, severely curtailing media freedom and prohibiting the struggles of the masses.

And the PA regime, fearful of the eruption of mass struggles against the next stage of its IMF-World Bank agenda, which will see such state-owned sectors as electricity, water, the postal services, state banks and natural resources like phosphate in the rural areas opened up to private capital, is strengthening the hand of the state.

It would, however, be unable to rule without the support of the LSSP, the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL) and the Ceylon Workers Congress, together with the trade union bureaucracies and the Tamil bourgeois parties.

The LSSP and the CPSL have played the key role. In 1994, when the ruling UNP government faced mass opposition, they rallied behind the SLFP to form the PA as the capitalist alternative government. They have supported the PA's prosecution of the war and the placing of the country on a “war footing” together with the promulgation of emergency regulations. Both parties are vociferous advocates of the PA's devolution package aimed at dividing the working class.

Summing up the hostility of all the bureaucracies to the struggles of the working class against price rises and austerity measures, a recent statement of the LSSP declared: “The truth is that there cannot be a ‘war footing’ for a country without also having for it the compensatory ‘war economy.’”

From the outset, the SEP and its predecessor the Revolutionary Communist League has opposed the war against the Tamil people, fighting against all forms of racism and chauvinism for the unity of the working class. The fight for these principles means that the SEP is likewise opposed to the separatist policy of the LTTE to establish a bourgeois statelet in the north and the east. This is not a program to secure the democratic rights of the Tamil masses. Rather it is a bourgeois policy aimed at dividing the Tamil workers from their Sinhala-speaking brothers and sisters—to the detriment of both.

Knowing that the western powers, and above all India, do not support its separatist program, the LTTE has expressed its willingness to collaborate with the blood-soaked Colombo regime if the latter is prepared to give more powers to the Tamil elite. Neither a separatist program nor so-called power-sharing will defend the democratic rights of the Tamil oppressed, but will only strengthen the hand of both the Sinhala and Tamil ruling classes.

While the LSSP and CPSL joined the PA, the “left” Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) stayed outside its ranks in order to better play its part in the maintenance of capitalist rule. In 1994 it supported the bringing to power of the PA regime, promoting the illusion that Kumaratunga would end the war, bring peace and restore the democratic rights snatched away by the UNP regime.

The opportunist character of the NSSP is demonstrated by the fact that from 1995 to 1997 it supported the PA's devolution package as the solution to national oppression. Since then it has backed the demand for a separate Tamil “homeland” while at the same time forming an alliance with the anti-Tamil Sinhala chauvinist JVP. In all the twists and turns of the NSSP there is, however, one consistent thread: its opposition to an independent policy for the working class.

Only the SEP's program can provide a way out for the masses from the morass created by the bourgeois parties and their “left” supporters. It rests on three pillars: internationalism, the political independence of the working class and socialist policies.

* The SEP demands the withdrawal of the Sri Lankan armies from the north and east to end the war. We say: not a rupee, not a man for this catastrophic war. This is not a war of the workers and poor. It has been created and sustained by the ruling class heaping intolerable burdens on the masses.

* The drafting of a constitution must be undertaken by representatives of the popular masses and not by the wealthy few. As in 1948, 1972 and 1978, the PA and the political elite now seek to impose another constitution behind the backs of the people. Against these manoeuvres, the SEP demands the calling of a genuine Constituent Assembly comprised of delegates democratically elected from the masses to discuss and adopt a constitution based on their own independent interests.

* The social conditions of the workers and poor cannot be advanced under the profit system. Indeed they face even deeper erosion. Workers and the poor can only fight the attacks on jobs, working conditions, living standards, free education and health, by organising internationally and advancing a policy of economic reorganisation based on human needs and socialist principles. All the big businesses must be nationalised under workers' control, including the plantation industries. The ownership of all other land used for agriculture, must be entrusted to the tiller of the soil.

This struggle for democratic rights and a socialist program requires the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil workers fighting alongside workers throughout the Indian sub-continent and internationally. The perspective of the working class must be to fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam—led by a workers' and peasants' government—as part of the Socialist United States of the Indian sub-continent.

Workers, peasants, youth and sections of intellectuals have shown their opposition to war and repression and the degrading social conditions that have resulted from both PA and UNP rule. However this anger and disgust is not enough. It must be channelled into the fight for an alternative perspective, which will cut a path through the reactionary political fog created by the capitalist parties, the “left” opportunists and chauvinists.

The SEP, and its forerunner the Revolutionary Communist League, has established a record of fighting for socialist principles over more than three decades. It has grounded itself on the internationalist traditions established in the 1940s under the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India.

The internationalist perspective on which the SEP fights is developed every day through the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* to revive an international socialist culture in the world working class.

The SEP is preparing to undertake vigorous political and theoretical work in the election campaign aimed at educating workers, youth, students and intellectuals on its international socialist perspective. In order to carry out the election campaign it has launched a 500,000 rupee (\$US6,400) fund. The SEP appeals to all its supporters and sympathisers

to contribute to this fund, back its election initiative and in that way provide a way forward for the entire working class and oppressed masses.



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