

Election statement of the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party

A socialist program to end the war and social inequality

26 September 2000

The Socialist Equality Party is fielding a slate of candidates for the Colombo district in the Sri Lankan general elections to advance a socialist solution to the political impasse and social crisis confronting ordinary working people.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the Peoples Alliance (PA) won the 1994 elections by promising to end the country's devastating civil war. Kumaratunga also guaranteed to alleviate the poverty and unemployment produced by over a decade of "free market reforms" under the United National Party (UNP) and to end the previous government's attacks on democratic rights.

During the past six years, the PA government has broken all its promises. Far from ending the war, Kumaratunga has pursued military operations with even greater ferocity than her predecessors. More people have been killed in the conflict since 1994 than over the previous 12 years. In the first eight months of this year alone, the military budget has skyrocketed to 130 billion rupees or more than 40 percent of national income.

Living standards continue to decline as the rupee collapses and prices rise. The ruling coalition has pressed ahead with the program of economic restructuring demanded by the IMF and World Bank, including the corporatisation and privatisation of key government departments and state-owned enterprises. Health, education and welfare services have been cut to the bone to pay for the war and for huge financial incentives to investors.

The president has maintained emergency rule, along with a battery of anti-democratic laws that are being used to impose what amounts to martial law in the north and east, to incarcerate hundreds of Tamils without trial and to intimidate the media and political opponents. In May she declared the country to be on "a war footing" and imposed regulations outlawing strikes, public meetings and protests, as well as blanket censorship on all media. Several newspapers were closed as a result.

In the last months, the entire political establishment has plunged into an unprecedented crisis. Its military strategy lies in tatters after the fall of the key Elephant Pass army base in April and the subsequent advances by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the Jaffna peninsula. But the major parties cannot agree on any basis for peace negotiations. Kumaratunga was compelled to call the elections before they were due, after failing to gain the required majority in parliament for her constitutional package.

The conditions under which the poll is being held make a mockery of democracy. As a last minute concession, the government has eased censorship and its restrictions on public meetings, but retains its far-reaching emergency powers. It can thus crack down on parties and the press whenever it chooses. The media is still banned from reporting on the war in the north—the central issue in the election.

The campaign is being dominated by appeals to militarism and Sinhala

chauvinism as the UNP and PA compete for the votes of extreme rightwing groups like the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) and Sinhala Heritage Party (SUP). These parties insist that the war can only be ended by shedding more blood on the battlefields. In recent weeks, Kumaratunga has cynically launched new army offensives on the Jaffna peninsula, squandering hundreds of lives in an attempt to bolster her image and win more votes.

All the major parties are deeply compromised by their support for the war and for economic policies that have led to one round of job shedding and restructuring after another. Incapable of offering any progressive alternative to ordinary people, their campaigns are based on backroom deals, personal attacks, muckraking, thuggery and outright murder.

All the "left" and radical parties as well as the entire gamut of bourgeois and petty bourgeois Tamil organisations—from the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) to the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) bear responsibility for the disaster created by the PA government. Without their political support in 1994, Kumaratunga would not have been able to present herself to voters as "progressive," "democratic" and a champion of peace. Even the LTTE leaders, who now denounce her, supported Kumaratunga's election as a positive alternative to the UNP.

The old left leaderships—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party of Sri Lanka—are an integral part of the PA coalition. From their padded ministerial seats, they have backed the government to the hilt. The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) hailed the formation of the PA government in glowing terms. It preferred to observe from a discrete distance and then opportunistically entered an alliance with the fascistic JVP—the organisation responsible for the murder of NSSP members in the late 1980s.

Only the SEP warned that Kumaratunga and the PA were incapable of ending the war in a progressive manner or improving the living standards of the working class. Likewise, the SEP is the only party that states clearly and unequivocally that this war must be ended immediately. It is aimed at suppressing the democratic rights of the Tamil people. We therefore call for the complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan armed forces from the north and east. We say: not a man or rupee for this reactionary war which has claimed over 70,000 lives, left many more permanently maimed and compelled hundreds of thousands to flee their homes.

The SEP calls on all workers to reject the poisonous slogans of Sinhala chauvinism. They serve to justify using young men and women as cannon fodder and extracting taxes from working people in the south to buy bombs and bullets that rain down on their class brothers and sisters in the north and east. By vigorously opposing the war, the working class can rally to its side the oppressed masses—Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim—throughout the island who have been forced to bear its worst burdens. This must be the first step towards building a political movement

aimed at abolishing the outmoded capitalist system, which puts profits before all else, including human life.

The SEP fights for the establishment of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral part of the revolutionary struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics throughout the Indian sub-continent and internationally.

The Sri Lankan civil war is an acute expression of broader political and economic processes. Following World War II and the gaining of independence, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, like its counterparts throughout the Indian subcontinent, based itself on a program of import substitution, high tariffs, a fixed exchange rate and, to quell class tensions, a raft of limited social measures.

But the rise of transnational corporations and the growing global integration of production over the last two decades have completely undermined the policies of national economic regulation. In their bid to be “internationally competitive” and attract foreign investment, governments and corporations in every country have engaged in a continuous onslaught on the social position of the working class.

The slashing of jobs, conditions and social services has been accompanied by the promotion of fissiparous racial, religious and ethnic divisions, to prevent the disenchantment and anger of broad masses of people from being directed at the root cause of their problems—the capitalist system itself. Extreme rightwing and fascistic political tendencies have emerged in Europe, the US and elsewhere, paralleled across the Indian subcontinent by the domination of rightwing, communal parties such as the Hindu chauvinist BJP and the various Islamic fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The outbreak of the conflict in Sri Lanka was directly related to the turn by the UNP government in the late 1970s to “free market” deregulation and restructuring. Facing growing opposition to its policies in the working class, president J.R. Jayewardene turned to the stock-in-trade of every Colombo politician—anti-Tamil chauvinism—that culminated in the pogroms of 1983, claiming hundreds of lives and setting the country on the path to war.

But like the long-running conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and Kashmir, the civil war has become a barrier to the interests of globally mobile capital, which demands, above all, access to cheap labour, effective policing of free trade zones and a stable, subservient government. Moreover the Sri Lankan conflict constantly threatens to spill over into India, which is now regarded by investors as a new and highly lucrative field of operation. For these reasons, the Kumaratunga government has been under intense pressure from the major powers—first through the “Norwegian initiative” and then from India—to find a formula to end the war.

But this has proven to be fraught with difficulties. Seventeen years of fighting have created powerful vested interests for the military top brass, the war profiteers, the Buddhist clergy and various rightwing groups. They are adamantly opposed to any concessions to the Tamil minority and insist that the war be fought to the bitter end.

As a result, the Sri Lankan ruling class has been caught in a cleft stick. Major sections of big business, desperate to attract foreign investment, have been publicly campaigning during the past two years for the PA and UNP to come together and thrash out a package of constitutional reforms. They want the war ended through a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim elites that would facilitate their joint exploitation of the island's working class.

At the same time, however, the entire history of the major parties is bound up with the promotion of Sinhala chauvinism—one of the chief political tools of bourgeois rule for more than 50 years. Sri Lanka's politicians were well-schooled by their British masters in the techniques of “divide and rule”. One of the first acts of the incoming government in 1948 was the elimination of citizenship rights for Tamil plantation

workers. This was followed by the Sinhala-only policy in 1956 and the 1972 constitution enshrining Buddhism as the state religion.

So while the PA and UNP both advocate constitutional changes and negotiations to end the war, both are deeply fearful of alienating their traditional bases of political support. Since coming to power, Kumaratunga has successively watered down the limited concessions on offer to the Tamil ruling elites, to the point where the latest package has been rejected by the LTTE, the TULF and other Tamil parties. The UNP's participation in months of talks with the PA over constitutional changes earlier this year broke down when the package came under fire from the Buddhist hierarchy and Sinhala extremists.

The working class must adopt its own independent attitude to the devolution package. Like every other constitutional change in Sri Lanka's history, it constitutes an attempt by the ruling class to rearrange its affairs of state behind the backs of ordinary people. The changes will entrench in a constitutional form the very ethnic and religious antagonisms that have been whipped up by bourgeois politicians over the past half century to divide the working class. The communal character of the new constitution is shown, above all, in the maintenance of Buddhism as the state religion. By further institutionalising racial and religious divisions, the new constitution will only lay the basis for further conflict and ethnic cleansing as communal leaders ruthlessly seek to consolidate their power bases against their rivals.

The SEP's opposition to the devolution package has nothing in common with the chauvinist positions of the JVP, the SUP and other Sinhala extremists who, under the banner of defending the unitary state, seek to maintain the political dominance of the Sinhalese elites. Our chief criticism of the proposed constitution is not that it “divides the nation” but that it divides the working class. The SEP's program is aimed at the unification of the working class for the abolition of the capitalist nation state, which has been the chief instrument of its oppression. In doing so we vigorously defend all basic democratic rights and insist on an end to all discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sex or language.

Neither does the SEP support the LTTE's demand for a separate Tamil state. Like the Sinhala chauvinists, the LTTE's propagandists hide the class roots of the conflict and blame Sinhalese workers and peasants for the crimes of the ruling class. The class logic of the LTTE's outlook finds its sharpest expression in the indiscriminate bombings that regularly claim the lives of ordinary Sinhalese, and in its communalist attacks on Tamil Muslims.

Like the PLO in the Middle East and the ANC in South Africa, the LTTE no longer opposes imperialism even in words. Its leadership openly seeks sponsorship from the major powers to further the interests of a thin layer of the Tamil middle class whose ambition is to act as local compradors for investors in a capitalist statelet of Eelam. No one should be surprised if Prabakaran follows the lead of other “national liberation leaders” in exchanging his jungle fatigues for a business suit and turns up, like Arafat and Mandela, to shake hands with the US president on the White House lawn.

The SEP advocates a proletarian internationalist solution to the war. While recognising that the immediate withdrawal of all Sri Lankan troops from the north and east may lead to the seizure of power by the LTTE, this step is the only means for forging a fighting unity of the working class and of rousing the oppressed masses to establish a workers and peasants government on the island as part of a broader revolutionary movement throughout the Indian subcontinent.

In place of the proposed devolution package drawn up behind closed doors by cliques of capitalist politicians, the SEP calls for the convening of a Constituent Assembly charged with drawing up a constitution and settling all outstanding issues of democratic rights. Such an assembly must be elected openly and democratically by and for ordinary working people.

The SEP advocates the complete separation of church and state, an end

to Buddhism as the state religion and the abolition of all state subsidies to religious bodies. All citizens must enjoy equal rights regardless of race, language or religion. We also call for the immediate abrogation of all repressive and discriminatory laws, including the Citizenship Acts that continue to deprive thousands of plantation Tamils of basic rights, the Public Security Act, Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The SEP's policy to end the war is grounded on the fundamental planks of socialist internationalism:

For the international unity of the working class

Sri Lankan workers are part of an international class. Along with the rural masses and the urban poor they face the same economic hardships, declining living standards and unemployment that affect workers of all nationalities. Around the world, workers face the same class enemy—globally organised capital—that pits one section of the working class against another in a constant battle to lower production costs and increase profits. To combat this endless offensive against living standards, the working class must adopt its own international strategy.

Workers in Sri Lanka must give their unstinting support to their counterparts overseas and seek the assistance of their class brothers and sisters for their own struggles. The essential precondition for establishing the unity of all workers is the rejection of all forms of racism, chauvinism and nationalism. The working class has to actively champion the economic and democratic rights of all workers regardless of race, language, religion or ethnic origin.

For social equality

Capitalist politicians and the media claim that the IMF's free market policies will boost living standards and provide opportunities. All of them crowed over the success of the "Asian tigers" until 1997 when the "miracle" came crashing down, plunging millions into unemployment and poverty. In Sri Lanka as elsewhere, economic restructuring has led to a widening social gulf. The share of national income of the poorest 40 percent has fallen from 19.29 percent in 1973 to 15.30 percent in 1997, while the proportion going to the wealthiest 20 percent has jumped from 42.95 percent to 49.5 percent.

The SEP advances the socialist principle that everyone must have the resources needed for a productive, secure and enjoyable life. Social equality is not a utopia. The vast technological, scientific and medical achievements made in recent years have created the potential to lift living standards internationally and meet the needs of all. But this requires a direct challenge to the profit system, which is no longer capable of meeting even the most elementary needs of society.

For a workers and peasants government

Throughout the half century since formal independence, the Sri Lankan ruling class has demonstrated its complete incapacity to meet the aspirations of ordinary working people for basic democratic rights and decent living standards. Its ability to stay in power has rested on the treachery of the traditional leaderships of the working class—above all the betrayal of the LSSP.

By relinquishing the struggle for socialist internationalism and joining the capitalist government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964, the LSSP leaders abandoned the working class and left the oppressed masses in the hands of other class forces. The LSSP's actions contributed directly to the strengthening of nationalist and chauvinist elements, the rise of the JVP and LTTE, and ultimately to the war itself.

The necessary lessons have to be drawn. The working class must establish its political independence from all the representatives of the capitalist class. Only by fighting for its own class interests can it rally to its side the urban and rural poor, small farmers and shopkeepers and provide a way out of the present impasse through the establishment of a workers and peasants government to reconstruct society on socialist lines.

The SEP advocates the following policies:

Secure and well-paid jobs for all

Capitalism is incapable of ending the scourge of unemployment. Older workers are being thrown out of a job through the continual restructuring in private companies as well as the corporatisation and privatisation of state-owned enterprises. Young people have few job opportunities—70 percent of those aged 15 to 24 are unemployed. As a result many are forced to join the armed forces and risk being killed or maimed.

The SEP proposes the expansion of jobs through the reduction of the working week to 30 hours, with no loss of pay. Billions of rupees must be provided for a program of public works to create hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs and build urgently needed public housing, schools, hospitals, roads and irrigation schemes—in particular in the war-ravaged north and east of the country.

We call for an end to all forms of child labour and to the use of young people and women on night shifts. To develop their capacities, all young people should have access to paid, professional training in government-run programs and to well-equipped cultural and sporting facilities. Women workers must be granted equal pay, fully-paid maternity leave and provided with free, well-equipped and staffed child care facilities.

For high quality, free public education

To meet the IMF's benchmarks for budget spending, to boost military spending and to provide tax breaks for business and investors, the PA government has sacrificed public education, health and welfare programs. Hundreds of schools have already been shut down and many more will go if the government's proposal to limit free education to those under 14 is adopted. Far from encouraging critical thought, the curricula and schoolbooks are being rewritten to instill the bigoted views and reactionary myths of Sinhala chauvinism in the minds of young children.

Young people must have the opportunity to develop their skills and creativeness to the full. The SEP calls for a vast expansion of public education to provide all-rounded free, high quality education, up to and including university level, for all who wish to pursue their studies. Existing schools and institutions must be upgraded to provide access to scientific laboratories, computer facilities and the latest audio-visual educational techniques.

For free, first class health care and proper welfare programs

Given the astonishing developments in medical science it is a scandal that people continue to die of readily preventable diseases. Government cutbacks to medical programs have led to a countrywide rise in the incidence of malaria, diarrhea and mumps. A doctor's prescription now costs 300 rupees and many workers are unable to afford to buy medicines. The waiting list for heart surgery in a public hospital is now more than a year. But for those who can afford 300,000 rupees, the operation can be performed straight away in a private hospital. The SEP calls for the development of well-equipped and properly staffed government hospitals and clinics in order to provide high quality health care free of charge to everyone. Women must be granted the right to abortion.

The level of poverty has risen sharply from 5.4 million in 1970-72 to 8.6 million in 1996-97, but government assistance schemes have been successively cut back. The suicide rate, at 22 per day, is one of the highest in the world. The SEP calls for a vast expansion of welfare programs with pensions and allowances for the elderly, the unemployed, the sick and infirm, to provide for a decent standard of living. Facilities such as properly equipped old-age and maternity homes should be available to all those who need them.

Decent housing for all families

Many families live in substandard houses without basic amenities such as running water, electricity and proper toilet facilities. Rents have shot up, putting proper housing beyond the reach of masses of people. Within the city limits of Colombo, 57 percent of the population lives in shanties. The government's answer is to drive the poor out of the slums, in order to make the land available to big business.

The SEP calls for the construction of affordable public housing with all essential utilities to provide decent accommodation for all families. A system of rent control must be put in place and policed to prevent profiteering by unscrupulous landlords. Vacant houses and flats should be made available to poor families at nominal rents.

Alleviate the plight of small farmers

The need for land has become more and more acute throughout the country. According to official figures, the vast majority of farmers—72 percent—have less than 1.6 hectares of land. Of these, nearly seven percent have no land at all.

Both the UNP and PA have exploited the crisis facing the landless Sinhala poor by deliberately settling them in colonies in the midst of predominantly Tamil areas, in the northern Wanni area and in the Eastern region—a policy which has exacerbated racial tensions. Poor peasants everywhere have been caught in a “scissors crisis” as production costs rise but commodity prices continue to fall dramatically.

The SEP calls for state land to be made available to all landless farmers, regardless of their ethnicity. Bank loans, agricultural equipment, fertilisers and chemicals must be provided to all poor farmers on easy terms. The price of agricultural produce should be guaranteed so as to ensure a decent standard of living for farming families.

Big business and its political representatives will brand these modest proposals as “unrealistic” and claim that there is no money to carry them out. But it is totally unrealistic to expect the majority of ordinary people to live without these essential requirements. The resources exist to provide them, but they are currently in the hands of the wealthy few and the transnational corporations.

To implement its program, the SEP proposes, as a first step, to halt all spending on the war. The economic cost of the 17-year conflict has been conservatively estimated at more than 2.2 trillion rupees. This money could have been used to build and equip scores of modern hospitals and schools, to construct much needed public housing and provide electricity, sewerage and clean water to tens of thousands of families.

A workers and peasants government will have to make deep inroads into the bastions of private wealth. The entire economy must be placed under the democratic control of the working class and social priorities transformed to fulfil the needs and aspirations of the majority, not the profits of a tiny minority.

The socialist reconstruction of society is impossible, however, within the confines of a single nation state. The collapse of the bureaucratic regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe testifies to the reactionary and utopian character of the Stalinist perspective of “socialism in a single country”. A workers and peasants government in Sri Lanka would rapidly disintegrate if it were not part of a powerful movement of the proletariat of the Indian subcontinent and throughout the world. That is why the SEP in Sri Lanka, along with its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), regards its fundamental political task as the regeneration of socialist consciousness in the international working class to prepare for the social upheavals that lie ahead.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, was founded in 1968 after the LSSP's betrayal. It has sought to reforge a genuine socialist party in Sri Lanka as part of the ICFI—the world Trotskyist movement—and revive the powerful traditions of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) that fought to unite workers throughout the Indian subcontinent in a struggle against British imperialism and capitalist rule.

The degeneration of the LSSP is part of a broader collapse of the old bureaucratic leaderships of the working class internationally. On the basis of their nationalist programs, the trade union, social democratic and Stalinist parties have openly abandoned any defence of the most basic rights of workers, producing considerable confusion and disorientation. The reconstruction of the socialist movement is not simply a matter of

replacing existing bureaucrats with more militant leaders. It requires drawing essential lessons from the strategic experiences of the 20th century—above all the rise, decline and fall of the Soviet Union—and consciously rebuilding a genuine socialist culture among broad layers of workers, intellectuals and youth.

We call on workers, young people, housewives, students, professional people, small farmers and the unemployed to support a socialist alternative to war and social inequality by voting for our candidates. We urge all those who agree with our program and perspective to participate in our election campaign and to join and build the Socialist Equality Party.



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