

Socialist Equality Party's election campaign reaches hundreds of thousands in Sri Lanka

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The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka has been conducting a vigorous election campaign throughout the capital of Colombo where the party has fielded a slate of 23 candidates, headed by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias. The Colombo district is the largest in the country with an estimated 1.38 million voters from all of the major ethnic groups.

The party was founded in 1968 as the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) but was only granted official recognition in May. Under one of the provisions of the electoral laws, the national television station Rupavahini had to allocate 15 minutes to the SEP to broadcast its policies in both Sinhala and Tamil. Wije Dias used the opportunity last month to call for the immediate withdrawal of the armed forces from the North and East in order to halt the country's protracted civil war to suppress the democratic rights of the Tamil minority.

"The main issue in the present political situation is the war," he said. "The war is the culmination of Sinhala chauvinist policies pursued by the ruling class to divide the working class and maintain its rule. Hundreds of thousands of Tamils have been made refugees while the number of dead is more than 60,000. In the south, the PA and UNP governments have used the war to justify the curbing of democratic rights, the destruction of jobs and living standards and the slashing of free education and health services. The PA [Peoples Alliance] came to power in 1994 promising to end the war and improve living condition but has broken all its promises."

Dias explained that the constitutional reforms proposed by the Peoples Alliance government were incapable of ending the war in a progressive way. "The constitutional package is not a solution to the democratic rights of the Tamil masses. A constituent assembly must be called with representatives elected democratically by workers and the oppressed to draft a constitution to establish democratic rights. Sinhala and Tamil workers have to unite, oppose chauvinism and campaign for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam. Workers must unite internationally to fight the attacks of the international corporations."

He outlined the SEP's socialist policies to end the social disaster facing workers and the oppressed masses. "Poor peasants must be given lands and other assistance to carry on cultivation. Education, health and other social programs have to be improved. Youth have to be given a proper living allowance until they are provided with jobs." The first step in implementing this program, he said, was to end the war and divert the vast sums of money spent on the

military into badly needed social services. He explained that the profit system was incapable of meeting the needs of the working class and that society had to be reconstructed on a socialist basis in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The speech, which was also delivered in Tamil by SEP Central Committee member M. Thevarajah, was relayed throughout the country to hundreds of thousands of people. Dias and Thevarajah also spoke on the private television station, Sirasa TV, which gives three minutes free-of-charge, in Sinhala, Tamil and English, to candidates from registered parties. The same channel covered the SEP public meeting in the city centre and broadcast it along with other election coverage.

The SEP campaign stands in complete contrast to those of the PA government, the opposition United National Party (UNP) and the 40 other parties standing in the general elections. A record 5,000 candidates have nominated. None of these parties or independents have any solution to the crucial issues facing ordinary working people—the war and declining living standards. Instead, many have resorted to crude Sinhala chauvinism, mudslinging and outright thuggery to deaden the consciousness of voters and prevent any serious political discussion.

By Tuesday there were 957 election-related incidents reported officially to the Elections Secretariat, most of which involved allegations of violence against the party thugs of the PA and UNP and also against the police. So far there have been eight murders, 17 cases of attempted murder using guns and bombs, 25 serious injuries and 239 other injuries.

Among workers and the oppressed masses, there is widespread disaffection with the major parties—the PA and the UNP—both of which have continued the war and presided over falling living standards and deepening social polarisation. According to an opinion poll conducted by Survey Research Lanka, 36 percent of voters say there is no basic difference between the two.

Another poll revealed that 41.1 percent of voters are dissatisfied with the PA government and just 17.2 percent say that it has kept the promises contained in its 1994 election manifesto. Only 34.1 percent of those polled believe that the UNP will find the money to carry out its election promises. Most, however, indicate that they will continue to vote for the two major parties and that the margin is very close—37.9 percent for the PA and 38.1 percent for the UNP.

Apart from the officially stipulated television time, the media has largely shunned the SEP's campaign. The big business parties rely

heavily on paid advertisements and their candidates are reportedly spending more than 50 million rupees on their campaigns. In addition to advertisements the PA and UNP receive substantial free coverage of their speeches and rallies on television, radio and in the press.

Significantly the media have also promoted the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), which has announced that if it comes to power it will declare martial law and fight the war to the finish. JVP representatives have been invited to participate in all the major television debates and the *Aratuwa* newspaper, owned by the major conglomerate, the Ceylinco Group, published an extensive summary of the JVP's election program.

By comparison the media coverage of the SEP has been very limited. The Sinhala daily, *Lankadeepa*, published a 25 column-inch story based on an interview with Wije Dias. The *Daily Mirror* and *Virakesari* newspapers are yet to publish anything, even though they have also interviewed Dias. *The Weekend Express* published the article entitled "Conditions in Colombo's shanties highlight Sri Lanka's housing crisis" written by SEP candidate Priyadarshana Meddawatte and posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* on September 21.

The SEP has held two public meetings in working class areas—at Slave Island in the middle of Colombo, which has a significant number of Tamil Muslims and Malays, and at Ratmalana, an industrial town with a large number of garment factories. SEP candidates Nanda Wickramasingha, W.A. Sunil, Vilani Peris, M. Thevaraja and Priyadarshana Meddawatte spoke on different aspects of the SEP's program and its attitude to the other political parties. Wije Dias concluded with a detailed analysis of the political situation, the historical origins of the war and the necessity for the working class to unify its struggles on the basis of a socialist program.

The party has also campaigned at major workplaces in the Colombo electoral district, including the port, railway workshops, factories, public hospitals and a plantation area. Teams also visited the universities and major towns in the area and engaged in an extensive door-to-door campaign. So far the SEP has distributed 80,000 leaflets and party manifestos and sold several thousand copies of the party's newspapers, *Kamkaru Mawatha* and *Tholilalar Pathai*, published in Sinhala and Tamil respectively.

Workers and others who have spoken to the SEP frequently express their opposition to the war and readily point to the impact that it has had on their lives. Few have any faith in the promises being made by the major parties or in their capacity to end the war.

One young worker explained that he had campaigned for the PA in 1994 but was now disillusioned with the ruling coalition. "This government came to power promising to end the war and other things. It now spends 50,000 million rupees on the war. The JVP is no different. It has issued a book promising lots of things, without explaining how they are going to find the money for them. It is again propagating communalism."

A factory worker drew the direct connection between the war and falling living standards, saying: "This war is a curse. The sky rocketing prices are affecting us. You are the only party talking about a workers and peasant government. I like that idea. We will

read this manifesto."

Many more point to the difficult situation they face. A retired worker explained: "My monthly pension is 4,700 rupees. We supported this government last time expecting a lot of things as we were squeezed by the UNP regime. But the prices of all commodities have gone up. Recent increases in gas prices and charges on electricity and water have worsened the situation."

Most people wanted peace but did not have a clear idea of how to end the war or that the working class could actively intervene with its own independent perspective. The SEP's call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of troops from the North and East provoked considerable discussion, but no ready agreement. Many felt that the policies pursued by previous governments had led to the war and sympathised with the SEP's call for a unified struggle, but said that they wanted to think over the demand for troops to be withdrawn.

A conversation in the village of Thelavala, just south of Colombo, was typical. One housewife said: "We need peace to live. We do not know when we go out whether we will return or not." As the discussion proceeded, another housewife joined in, adding emphatically: "It is good to find a way to end the war. Youth are being killed on the battlefield. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslims were all born in this country. They have to live together. The war started because of the past mistakes of governments." But she was concerned that the withdrawal of troops would lead to the division of the island.

Thousands of Tamils have fled the fighting in the North and East to live in Colombo. Many cannot vote as the authorities have made it difficult for them to register. They are also understandably reticent to immediately speak as they are routinely harassed and rounded up by police. As one teacher from Jaffna explained, his family had still not recovered from the shock of the war. He was surprised by the boldness of the SEP's policy to end the war and said: "I want to read both your Tamil and Sinhala manifestos to compare them as some people say one thing in Sinhala and another thing in Tamil." He was pleased that both were the same.

Many young people were keen to follow the *World Socialist Web Site*. A number of Tamil students in the Tamil-populated Wellawatte area of Colombo told SEP campaigners that they had access to the Internet and would visit the web site.



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