A socialist platform for the 2001 Sri Lankan election

By Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party is fielding a slate of 24 candidates in the Colombo district to advance a socialist solution to the ever-deepening social and economic disaster confronting ordinary working people as a result of the policies of the Peoples Alliance, the United National Party and their various coalition partners.

This election is being held in a transformed political situation. The US-led war against Afghanistan signals the eruption of a new period of outright colonialism. Under the pretext of a "war on terrorism" the United States is seeking to establish its domination over the vast oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Basin. Not to be outdone, the other major powers, including Britain, Germany, France and Japan, are also committing troops in order to establish themselves as players in the new struggle for resources, markets and profits.

The SEP, and its political organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, unequivocally condemn the war, which has been launched by the US in an attempt to maintain its global hegemony. Three wars—first against Iraq, then Yugoslavia and now Afghanistan—have been launched in the past 10 years. Moreover, even as preparations are being made for turning Afghanistan into a UN-administered protectorate, new targets are being discussed. A section of the US military and ruling elite has made no secret of the fact that, after securing Afghanistan, Iraq should be next. Vice-president Dick Cheney has warned that up to 50 states could face action by the US in its "war on terrorism".

In the 19th century the dominant powers imposed their rule in the name of "taking up the white man's burden" and bringing civilisation and order to the "backward peoples" of the world. With the emergence of the socialist workers' movement and in the wake of the Russian Revolution of 1917, they were forced to grant limited independence, handing over political power to their allies in the former colonies. For a time, the politics of the Cold War, in which various bourgeois nationalists were able to balance between the imperialists on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other, provided a limited measure of independence. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, vast areas of the world were opened up for capitalist exploitation. Since then, the global struggle for raw materials and resources, which formed the driving force for the colonialism of the 19th and early 20th centuries, has returned.

Across the Indian sub-continent, the war against Afghanistan has become the catalyst for a series of significant political shifts. The Pakistani regime of Musharraf has aligned itself with the US in the hope that it can regain lost ground in its ongoing conflict with India. For its part, the Indian bourgeoisie has backed the US on the basis that when the winds change, and US interests dictate another tactical turn, it will be in a better position to advance its push against Pakistan, especially in Kashmir, in the name of pursuing the "war on terrorism". In this way, the people of the sub-continent are facing the threat of impending open conflict between two nuclear-armed powers.

In Sri Lanka, as well, the entire official political establishment has lined up behind the US. Kumaratunga spoke for them all when she offered every assistance and all facilities at Sri Lankan airports and harbours, boasting that her government was "quick to offer its full support and co-operation to President Bush and Prime Minister Blair in their efforts to unite the world against terrorism." Parliament was not even informed, let alone consulted.

The UNP, the oldest capitalist party in Sri Lanka, has pursued a pro-imperialist policy from its very origins and fully backs the PA's support for the war. The JVP, the PA's election partner, has shelved its anti-imperialist rhetoric to line up behind the war. Likewise the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) has fully endorsed the "steps taken to co-operate with the international community in measures taken to weaken the capability of the terrorist movement."

Sixty years ago, the LSSP had its origins in the decision by its Trotskyist founders to oppose support for British imperialism during the Second World War, explaining that in its war of "democracy" against Nazism, Britain was in fact striving to maintain its colonial empire against its rival, Germany. Today, the complete degeneration of the LSSP is summed up in its full support for a new colonial thrust into Central Asia.

The December 5 election itself has been called as a direct result of the "war on terrorism." The most powerful sections of big business have determined that the way is now open to push the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) into an agreement with the Colombo government, and bring an end to the 18-year war against the Tamils in the North and East.

But inasmuch as the PA regime, having aligned itself with the chauvinist JVP, has become an obstacle to such a settlement, the business elite has devoted considerable resources—political and financial—to ensuring its collapse, just one year after the last poll.

In seeking an end to the war, Sri Lanka's ruling circles are not motivated by the suffering of hundreds of thousands of Sinhala and Tamil families. After all, when the war erupted in 1983, they regarded it as a useful means of splitting the working class in the face of growing opposition to the UNP government's moves towards a free market economy. But the civil war now conflicts with their needs. Their chief concerns are that it diverts valuable resources from economic restructuring and that it conflicts with their drive to turn Sri Lanka into an attractive source of investment for transnational corporations.

From the day it was launched in 1983, the SEP (and its predecessor the Revolutionary Communist League) has been the only party to intransigently oppose the war in the North and East and fight for the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil masses against both the UNP and PA regimes.

The war cannot be ended on a progressive basis through the official political establishment. The working class must reject the poisonous slogans of Sinhala chauvinism, which have been utilised to turn young men and women into cannon fodder, and mobilise instead on the basis of an independent program that articulates its own class interests. We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East. We say not another man or rupee for this reactionary

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war which has already claimed over 80,000 lives, left many thousands permanently maimed and driven hundreds of thousands from their homes.

In the current election campaign it would appear to the superficial observer that there has been something of a reversal of roles. In 1994, the PA campaigned as the supposed party of peace, calling for negotiations with the LTTE. At that time, the UNP denounced it for giving way to terrorists and threatening the unitary Sri Lankan state. Contrary to the claims of organisations such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party, however, the SEP insisted that the PA did not represent a progressive alternative, and that its election could not advance the interests of the working class or secure the democratic rights of the Tamil people.

Now the UNP, responding to the demands of big business, has formed an alliance with the Tamil and Muslim communal parties calling for a negotiated settlement. The PA, having joined forces with the racist and fascistic JVP, accuses the UNP of agreeing to LTTE demands for a separate state and of reaching a deal to make the LTTE leader president of the country after two years. At the same time Kumaratunga insists that she is ready to enter talks with the LTTE, provided the unitary state is accepted.

The sordid accusations and counter-accusations flying between the two main parties express, in the final analysis, the conflicting interests of global capital, on the one hand, and the political foundations of the Sri Lankan state, on the other. Global capital wants access to cheap labour and investment zones and a stable, subservient government—demands which are undermined by the continuation of the war in the North and East. But 18 years of war have created powerful vested interests—including the military top brass, war profiteers, rightwing Sinhala chauvinist groups, and the Buddhist clergy—which all require its continuation.

Above all, the continuous invocation of racism is bound up with the fact that neither party has any policy to meet the needs and aspirations of the mass of the population. Consequently, they alternate in playing the race card, seeking to divide the masses and, in that way, maintain capitalist rule.

The UNP is no more a progressive alternative today than the PA was in 1994, when it campaigned for a negotiated settlement. While in this campaign the PA is more aggressively whipping up chauvinism, the UNP and its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe stress that his administration would “impose discipline” and “law and order”—an ominous sign of the anti-democratic measures he has in store.

In advancing its program to end the war, the SEP is guided by one overriding principle: the necessity for the working class to fight for its independence from the bourgeois parties and the capitalist state. Only in this way can the bitter legacy of decades of racism and chauvinism be overcome.

In demanding an immediate end to all funding for the war and the withdrawal of all Sri Lankan troops from the North and the East, the SEP stands opposed to the maintenance of the unitary state by force of arms. Such a policy is not only an attack on the democratic rights of the Tamil people, but, as the past 18 years have shown all too clearly, leads to the domination of militarism and the undermining of democratic rights throughout the country.

In opposing the forcible maintenance of the unitary state, the SEP does not support the LTTE’s demand for a separate capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam. This demand articulates, not the interests of the Tamil masses but those of the Tamil bourgeoisie, which, like its counterparts in other national movements, seeks to establish its own relations with global capital for the exploitation of the working class. Were a separate state to be established, we can predict with certainty that the day after “independence” the leaders of an LTTE Eelam government would offer investment opportunities to international capital markets, stressing the advantages of cheap labour in the regions they controlled.

The SEP is likewise opposed to the various devolution packages that have been put forward as a basis for ending the war. Devolution is not a means for securing the democratic rights of the Tamil people. Rather, it is a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites in order to facilitate their joint exploitation of the island’s working class.

Devolution, whatever form it takes, will not overcome racism and chauvinism but will, on the contrary, institutionalise it. Dividing the island up into regions controlled by local elites will only entrench divisions on racial lines and open up a struggle between regions for resources, while at the same time promoting ethnic cleansing against minority populations—whether they be Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim—within each region.

From the very foundation of the Sri Lankan state under the Soulbury constitution, the ruling class has promoted racism and chauvinism as a means of maintaining its rule—from the elimination of citizenship rights for Tamil plantation workers in 1948, to the Sinhala-only policy in 1956, the 1972 constitution enshrining Buddhism as a state religion and the launching of the war in the North and East in 1983.

At every stage in this squalid history, constitutional changes in the Sri Lankan state have been decided by cliques of capitalist politicians behind the backs of the masses. The implementation of any devolution package as part of a plan to end the war and reach a deal with the LTTE and other Tamil parties will be no different.

In place of yet another manoeuvre, the SEP advocates 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 establishment of a genuine democracy is impossible without the separation of church and state. This means ending the status of Buddhism as a state religion and the withdrawal of all state subsidies to religious organisations. It means the abrogation of all repressive and discriminatory laws, including the Citizenship Acts which deprive thousands of plantation Tamils of their rights, together with the ending of the Public Security Act, Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The SEP advances its demand for the convening of a Constituent Assembly as a vital democratic component of its socialist perspective. More than 50 years of so-called independence have proven the truth of the Trotskyist analysis—embodied in the theory of permanent revolution—that only the conquest of political power by the working class and the establishment of a socialist society can secure the establishment of genuine democracy. The SEP therefore fights for the establishment of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral part of the struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics throughout the Indian sub-continent and internationally.

The election takes place under conditions of imperialist war and gathering global recession, which are already having a major impact on the Sri Lankan economy. Export markets for garments, the main foreign currency earner, have been slashed, cutting production to 50 percent of capacity.

This situation has been aggravated by a sharp increase in war expenditure, which has risen from a budget allocation of Rs 50 billion to Rs 85 billion, due to the acquisition of new weapons following setbacks suffered by the armed forces in the North.

Foreign currency reserves have fallen to an all-time low, while the rate of economic growth in the second quarter fell to 0.4 percent, the lowest in three decades. The International Monetary Fund’s demands, issued in March this year, for cuts to the budget deficit, the restructuring of government departments and social service programs, and the further devaluation of the rupee, have been aimed at unloading the burden of the worsening economic situation onto the backs of workers and the rural poor.

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This comes on top of the cuts in living standards that began with the UNP in the 1980s and have continued under the PA regime. While prices of basic commodities have risen along with charges on basic services, social welfare measures have been cut back. Real wages, especially those of the lowest paid, have fallen continuously throughout the past decade.

Under the restructuring program dictated by the IMF and the World Bank, tens of thousands of jobs have been wiped out in major government-owned corporations. The pittance paid out in compensation for retrenchment has provided barely a few months subsistence, with former employees being thrown into abject poverty.

And more is to come. Plans for sweeping job cuts in state banks, the Central Bank, insurance, electricity and the ports have been drawn up and whatever party comes to power will attempt to implement them. The scale of the measures can be seen in the ports, where of the 19,500 workers presently employed, some 14,500 are to be retrenched. These job losses mean not only increased unemployment for the present generation, but the denial of a future for youth at a time when the unemployment rate for the 20-24 year age group stands at 34 percent.

Poverty is increasing, with 40 percent of families forced to live on a meagre monthly allowance of Rs.1,200 under the Samurdi scheme. The President herself recently admitted in an interview with the BBC that 40 percent of the entire child population in the country suffers from malnutrition.

Drastic cuts in welfare services, which were won through the struggles of the working class on behalf of the entire population, have affected rural people most. Likewise, the restructuring of free education and health services has resulted in the shutting of hundreds of rural schools and dozens of hospitals. High transport costs prevent poor children attending school, while depriving the sick of treatment.

The privatisation of education and health has placed these services beyond the reach of many. Today the primary cost of consulting a doctor amounts to two days pay for a worker. The supply of free medicines at government hospitals has virtually ended, while the price of pharmaceutical products has rocketed.

Small peasants, engaged in rice, vegetable and banana cultivation, are unable to find a way out of growing indebtedness, due to the abolition of subsidies on fertilisers, agrochemicals and seeds. As a result, growing numbers of peasants are being pushed out of their livelihoods, with no alternative means of income to sustain their families.

These are the direct consequences of the open market economic policies pursued by the UNP and PA regimes. Yet as these programs have cut a swathe through living standards, working class struggles have receded: from 89 strikes involving 44,312 workers in 1994 to 24 strikes involving 16,750 workers in 2000. The reason is not that the working class believes the PA regime has met its needs. It lies in the corporatist program of all sections of the trade union leadership—the LSSP, CP, CWC and UPF—which is responsible for suppressing workers' demands.

The free market program implemented by successive governments has widened social inequality to an unprecedented degree. More than 50 percent of the national income goes to the wealthiest 20 percent of the population, while the poorest 20 percent are left with no regular income whatsoever. One measure of the miserable conditions the masses face is the rapid increase in the incidence of suicides throughout the island. While the average suicide rate around the world ranges between 10-25 per 100,000 population, in Sri Lanka it is alarmingly high at over 55 per 100,000. Between 1950 and 1960, there were 6,472 reported suicides. Between 1990 and 2000 the number increased nearly twelve-fold to 72,064. This tragic situation is a direct product of the utter confusion and deep pessimism created by the lack of any alternative political perspective.

The Socialist Equality Party has a long and unblemished record of providing a truthful analysis of every problem—political, economic, social and cultural—confronting the masses and proposing a viable solution. The warnings of the SEP, not only about the policies of the capitalist parties, but also about the fake lefts, petty-bourgeois radicals and trade union bureaucrats, have been vindicated by developments in the class struggle both nationally and internationally.

Moreover, the SEP has engaged in every major struggle of the workers, peasants, youth, students, intellectuals and artists for their own independent interests and democratic rights, on the basis of the fundamental principles of socialist internationalism. Our existence and struggle as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International spans more than 33 years, beginning with the founding of our forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, in 1968.

The Socialist Equality Party stands for:

**** The international unity of the working class***

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 socialist 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.

**** A workers and peasants government***

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.

**** 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.

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 scheme—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 childcare facilities.

**** For high quality, free public education***

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

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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.

**** 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. All past debts of the poor farmers and fishermen must be cancelled while bank loans, agricultural equipment, fertilisers and chemicals as well as fishing gear must be provided to all these sections on easy terms. The price of agricultural produce should be guaranteed 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 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 18-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 fulfill 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 Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and the *World Socialist Web Site*, our international political organ, regard the fundamental political task as the regeneration of socialist consciousness in the working class of every country, to prepare for the social upheavals that lie ahead.

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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