

Socialist Equality Party contests Sri Lankan general election

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is fielding a slate of 24 candidates in the Colombo district in the Sri Lankan general elections to be held on December 5. General Secretary Wijesinghe Dias heads the SEP's ticket. Colombo, the country's capital and commercial and industrial hub with a population of 2.2 million, has 1.4 million voters representing all communities—Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim.

The SEP is the only party that speaks in the name of the working class and advances a socialist policy to unite working people against the divisive communal politics promoted by the major parties—the ruling Peoples Alliance (PA) and the opposition United National Party (UNP).

The election takes place at a key turning point in world politics. American imperialism, exploiting the revulsion felt over the September 11 terrorist attacks, has launched a war against one of the most impoverished countries of the world. The Bush administration is waging this war not to protect world civilisation or democracy as claimed, but to secure a client state in Afghanistan as part of long-held plans to control the vast oil and gas resources in the Central Asia.

The ruling elites and their regimes throughout Asia, including Sri Lanka, support the US-led war and, at the same time, use it for their own purposes—to fan chauvinism and to attack the basic democratic rights of working people. The conflict has sharpened tensions between the two-nuclear armed powers—India and Pakistan—over Kashmir, with potentially disastrous consequences for the region.

In Sri Lanka, the SEP is the only party that unequivocally opposes the war. The PA, UNP and Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have all lined up behind Bush's "global war against terrorism" and in doing so have demonstrated their pro-imperialist and anti-working class character.

The poll is being held just a year after the last general elections. Over the past 12 months, the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga has lurched from one crisis to the next. She lost her slender parliamentary majority in June after the defection of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) and suspended parliament on July 4 for two months

to avoid an opposition no-confidence motion.

Throughout the year, big business has been pushing for the PA and UNP to form a government of national unity to implement its agenda—a deal with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to end the country's 18-year civil war and the implementation of the market restructuring demanded by the IMF and World Bank. The two major groupings were unable to set aside their long-held animosities, however. In September, Kumaratunga reached an agreement with the JVP to restore a shaky majority.

But the September 11 attacks and the US-led war on Afghanistan changed the political equation in Sri Lanka. Big business regards the US-led "war against terrorism" as an ideal opportunity to pressure the LTTE into a peace deal and, at the same time, is acutely aware of the dangers of a looming global recession to the Sri Lankan economy. The country's growth rate for the year is predicted to be 0.6 percent—a level not seen in decades—and exports slumped by 7 percent in the first eight months of the year.

In the lead-up to a no-confidence motion on October 11, big business publicly expressed its dissatisfaction with the PA's deal with the JVP, whose extreme Sinhala chauvinism cut across any plans for negotiations with the LTTE. Behind the scenes, frantic manoeuvring resulted in a series of damaging defections from the PA, including senior members of Kumaratunga's own Sri Lanka Freedom Party. Rather than lose the vote, she dissolved parliament on October 10 and called an early election.

The manner in which the election was precipitated is a warning to the working class. Big business is desperate to end the war, not to halt the terrible suffering the conflict has caused, but in order to win back global investment and transform Sri Lanka into a cheap labour platform. Among its demands are the privatisation of state enterprises, a further cutback to welfare programs and the remains of free education and health, and a "hire and fire policy" in the labour market.

The PA came to power in 1994 promising to end the war, improve living standards and establish basic democratic

rights and did precisely the opposite. Fearing an electoral backlash, Kumaratunga is resorting to the stock-in-trade of every Colombo politician—Sinhala chauvinism—accusing the UNP of selling out the country by reaching “a secret deal with the LTTE”. At the same time, she is trying to bribe voters with a few meagre handouts, including small pay and pension increases for government workers.

Meanwhile the conservative UNP, which instigated the war in 1983 and is notorious for its attacks on the working class, is parading as the party of peace as well as the defender of jobs and democratic rights. Its election manifesto proposes talks with the LTTE and an end to factory closures. At the same time, however, UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe is stressing that his administration would “impose discipline” and “law and order”—an ominous sign of the anti-democratic measures he would use.

The most powerful sections of big business and virtually all of the private media have thrown their weight behind the UNP and its United National Front electoral alliance with PA renegades, the SLMC and various political organisations based among Tamil-speaking plantation workers. The UNP now promises peace but only last year it lined up with the JVP and the Buddhist hierarchy in a racist campaign against Kumaratunga’s proposed constitutional changes, accusing her of preparing to divide the country and hand a separate state to the LTTE.

There is no fundamental difference between the UNP and PA. The various plans to reach a deal with the LTTE all hinge on a power-sharing arrangement among the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites for their mutual exploitation of the working class. Such moves are backed by various Tamil parties, including the TULF, TELO, and EPRLF, but invariably produce a reaction from Sinhala chauvinists within the ranks of the UNP and PA as well as from parties such as the JVP. None of the parties have a solution to the pressing problems confronting masses of ordinary working people.

The campaign itself is dominated by mud-slinging, anti-Tamil racism, allegations of vote-rigging and intimidation, and cases of outright thuggery. By November 11, there had been 473 reported incidents of election-related violence including more than 40 of a serious nature. Five people have been killed. These methods are a sure sign of the anti-democratic nature of all the major parties.

Only the SEP is advancing a program to meet the interests of the working class and oppressed masses in Sri Lanka. Based on the principles of socialist internationalism, its candidates oppose all forms of racism and chauvinism and call for the unity of all workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—to fight for their common class interests.

The SEP opposes the war carried out against the Tamil

people by the PA and UNP and calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East. The party also opposes the establishment of a separate Tamil state and the various devolution packages. Against the Sinhala chauvinists who want to maintain the unitary state by force, and the bourgeois Tamil separatists who seek their own capitalist statelet, the SEP proposes the convening of a genuine Constituent Assembly, elected openly and democratically by ordinary working people, to determine the structure of the state.

The SEP advocates the abolition of all security laws and all measures that discriminate on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity or gender. It stands for the reconstruction of society to meet the social needs and aspirations of the majority, not the profit requirements of the wealthy few.

The imperialist war for Afghanistan raises anew the necessity of forging a united socialist movement of the working class throughout the Indian subcontinent as part of the struggle to unify workers internationally. Only on this basis can the working class fight new colonial encroachments by the major powers and defend its living standards and democratic rights. The SEP advances the perspective of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral part of the Union of Socialist Republics of the Indian sub-continent.

The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International and along with its sister parties seeks through the *World Socialist Web Site* to reestablish a socialist culture in the international working class. We call on workers, young people and intellectuals to actively support our campaign in Colombo and to contribute to our 100,000 rupee (\$US1,200) election fund.



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