

SEP holds public meeting on the political crisis in Sri Lanka

Our correspondent
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In the midst of the ongoing political crisis in Sri Lanka, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a public meeting in Colombo on December 18 to explain its perspective and program. The working class could not stand passively on the sidelines as events unfolded but had to intervene independently into the political situation on the basis of its class interests, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias stressed in the course of his report.

Around 200 workers, students, unemployed youth and pensioners attended the meeting. The SEP had distributed copies of its political statements in Sinhala and Tamil and put up posters advertising the meeting. Several people attended after reading the notice published on the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS).

K. Ratnayake, a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board, chaired the meeting. In opening, he explained that the political crisis which erupted with the autocratic moves by President Chandrika Kumaratunga on November 4 marked a turning point. He pointed to the frustrations in ruling circles over the failure of the president and the government to reach a compromise, citing the warning contained in a *Daily Mirror* editorial that the country was facing a “political volcano”.

Some analysts sought to reduce the crisis to a constitutional standoff between the president and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, Ratnayake said. The conflict, however, was the result of more fundamental issues connected to the country’s 20-year civil war. He said the working class could only understand its own tasks through an examination of the historical roots of the crisis as well as the profound economic and political shifts that have taken place internationally.

Wije Dias, who is also a WSWS International Editorial Board member, delivered the main report. He began by placing the political crisis in Sri Lanka in the context of the changed world situation. “The aggressive neo-colonial policies adopted by the Bush administration in particular have had a grave destabilising effect in every part of the globe,” he said. “The invasion of Iraq laid bare not only the ruthlessness of US imperialism in pursuing its policy of plunder but also the bankruptcy of international regulatory bodies, such as the United Nations, that have existed for more than five decades.”

Dias explained that the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq had sharpened tensions on the Indian subcontinent. The Pakistani regime of President Pervez Musharraf was under pressure from Washington to crush the Muslim fundamentalist organisations on which the Pakistani military and state apparatus had relied in the past. At the same time, the US was forging close ties with the Hindu supremacists of the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) in India, Pakistan’s longtime rival.

Dias said Washington wanted an end to the long-running civil war in

Sri Lanka, which it regarded as a destabilising influence and thus an impediment to its strategic and economic ambitions in the region. Responding to the pressure of the major powers and local business interests, Wickremesinghe’s United National Front (UNF) government which came to power in December 2001, signed a ceasefire with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and commenced negotiations for a peace deal.

“But the cease-fire signed in February 2002 and the peace talks started in September 2002 created sharp divisions within the ruling elite and between the bourgeois political parties. Even the pretence of granting concessions to the Tamil minority is vehemently opposed by sections of the political establishment in Sri Lanka. To understand why, one has to delve into the historical questions.

“The war that began in 1983 was a continuation and the culmination of the Sinhala chauvinist politics of the Sri Lankan ruling elite that started from the beginning of the last century. They learnt the pernicious method of ‘divide and rule’ from their British colonial masters.

“One of the first acts of the Colombo government, after independence in 1948, was to bring in a Citizenship Bill to disenfranchise more than a million Tamil-speaking plantation workers on the grounds of their Indian origin. Eight years later, Sinhala was enthroned as the only official language, forcing many Tamils to leave government jobs because of their non-proficiency in Sinhala.

“In the 1972 constitution, Buddhism was declared the state religion, discriminating against all other religions, including Hinduism, practiced by a majority of Tamils. On all these occasions, when the Tamils held peaceful protests they were suppressed using brutal police and military force.”

Dias explained that the United National Party (UNP), which came to power in 1977, adopted open market policies to integrate the island into the developing trend toward globalised production. Social welfare measures and thousands of jobs in the state and corporate sector were axed, provoking a general strike in July 1980. The UNP government responded by stirring up a vicious communal campaign to divide the working class—a process that led to the outbreak of war in 1983.

All the bourgeois parties, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the old left parties—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party—supported the war. Only the Revolutionary Communist League, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the forerunner to the SEP, unequivocally opposed the war and called for the unconditional withdrawal of the military from the north and east of the island.

Ranil Wickremesinghe was a cabinet minister in the UNP government that prosecuted the war for 11 years and, while in

opposition from 1994, backed the military efforts of Kumaratunga's Peoples Alliance (PA) to defeat the LTTE. Now, under pressure from the major powers and big business, he is seeking a settlement to the war and confronts the results of decades of communal politics.

"The two main bourgeois parties, the UNF [the ruling UNP-led alliance] and the PA, are caught in a dilemma," Dias said. "They cannot go against the dictates of the imperialist powers and their local big business allies to end the war and transform the island into a cheap labour platform. But they face vehement opposition from sections of the military, the Buddhist clergy and Sinhala chauvinist layers of their own electoral base.

"Pandering to these sections, President Kumaratunga waged a campaign against the cease-fire agreement and the 'peace process,' claiming it undermined national security and sovereignty. When her attempts to scuttle the peace talks through directing the navy to sink LTTE vessels failed, Kumaratunga decided on more direct action to destabilise the UNF government."

Dias said there had been an ongoing struggle for months over the levers of state power between the government and the president, who has substantial executive powers under the country's constitution. Kumaratunga insisted on making military and other senior appointments. She sought and won a Supreme Court ruling to confirm her constitutional right to exercise control over defence matters. The government responded by preparing an impeachment motion against the chief justice.

Matters came to a head shortly after the LTTE released its proposals on October 31 for an interim administration in the north and east—a step toward restarting stalled negotiations. On November 4, Kumaratunga unilaterally seized control of three key ministries—Defence, Internal Affairs and Media—and prorogued the parliament for two weeks. She announced a state of emergency, but before it could be formally imposed was compelled to retreat under strong international pressure—particularly from Washington and New Delhi.

Despite enormous pressure by foreign diplomats, local business organisations and the media for the president and the government to work together, the political standoff continued. Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe could agree on only one thing—that discussions take place in complete secrecy. "This expressed the reactionary nature of the new arrangements being prepared and their common fear of any public exposure of their real intentions before the workers and the oppressed masses," Dias said.

"The working class in Sri Lanka must not remain as onlookers in this crisis. It must find the means to intervene independently as a subject of history to take the leadership of the masses that resist the capitalist rule that is driving them into increasing misery. But to undertake this historical task, the working class must be armed with the strategic lessons of its past struggles that are deposited in the Marxist movement."

Dias said it was critical that workers understand the consequences of the LSSP's betrayal in 1964 when the party abandoned the basic principles of Trotskyism and entered the bourgeois government of Sirima Bandaranaike, Kumaratunga's mother. The LSSP's actions led directly to the emergence of radical petty bourgeois movements based on communalist politics—the JVP among oppressed Sinhala youth in the south and the LTTE which exploited grievances in the north against growing anti-Tamil discrimination.

The working class had to completely reject all forms of nationalism and racialism, which have produced two decades of war. The inability

of the political establishment in Colombo to find a way out of the present impasse was not just an acute crisis of bourgeois rule but reflected the unviability of the nation state system itself. The so-called independent state of Sri Lanka established in 1948 depended on the peculiar conditions of the post-war boom and the limited expansion that took place with a nationally-protected economy. The development of globalised production had completely undermined any basis for national economic regulation in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Elaborating a program for the working class, Dias emphasised the essential need of the working class to have an independent political perspective. "Recently, we have seen many sections of workers, in the south as well as in the north, entering into struggles. The strike movement has also had the active support of poor peasants, both Sinhala and Tamil. But a revolutionary alliance between the workers and the poor masses cannot be forged without the working class rising up to the task of providing an independent political leadership.

"This is why the working class must reject the peace deals, between the Colombo regime and the LTTE, brokered by the imperialist powers and call for the withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the north and east as the pre-condition for the ending of the war. The reactionary nature of these deals are revealed by the proposals of both the government and the LTTE for an interim administration for the northeast, plans which are thoroughly anti-democratic and communally divisive."

What was necessary was "not a secret patch-up job between the two bourgeois parties to end the political crisis, but a free and open election for a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution that abrogates all discriminatory communal laws, repressive parliamentary acts and military agreements with reactionary regimes.

"These democratic demands must be combined with the demand for the reorganisation of the economy to fulfill not the profit needs of the capitalist exploiters but the social needs of the working people. Only the socialist transformation of society can guarantee the achievement of full democratic rights. This is the perspective advanced by the SEP and the ICFI. It means the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a unified socialist states of the Indian sub-continent."

Dias concluded by explaining that this program could be achieved only on the basis of an internationalist working class perspective. He urged the audience to support the *World Socialist Web Site*, which provided political guidance on a daily basis for workers all over the world, and to join and build the SEP in Sri Lanka.



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