

Socialist Equality Party to stand in Sri Lankan elections

The Socialist Equality Party
2 March 2004

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka has decided to stand a slate of 23 candidates in the district of Colombo in the general elections scheduled for April 2. The district is the largest in the country and its industrial and commercial hub.

The slate will be headed by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, who is a member of the international editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Among the other SEP candidates are industrial workers, teachers, bank employees, students and unemployed youth—both Tamil and Sinhalese.

The SEP will utilise the elections to warn of the serious dangers facing the working class and to open up a broad discussion of the political program necessary to combat them.

The central issue confronting workers is the growing threat that the country will be plunged back into the catastrophic civil war that has already claimed more than 60,000 lives. Two years after the United National Front (UNF) government came to power and signed a ceasefire with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the so-called peace process has completely stalled.

Big business and the major powers have been pressing for a deal with the LTTE in order to transform the island into a cheap labour platform. But the “peace process” has provoked deep divisions in the state and the political establishment in Colombo, which has always relied on anti-Tamil chauvinism as a political tool for diverting social tensions and dividing working people along ethnic, language and religious lines.

From the outset, the “peace process” has been under sustained attack from sections of the state apparatus, particularly the military, and Sinhala extremist groups such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which regard any deal with the LTTE as tantamount to treason.

It is upon these layers that President Chandrika Kumaratunga increasingly turned as she denounced the United National Front (UNF) government for making impermissible concessions and endangering “national security” in talks with the LTTE. At their urging, she arbitrarily seized three key ministries, including defence, last November and then, in an unprecedented move, dismissed the elected government on February 7.

Kumaratunga’s actions have only emboldened the various Sinhala extremist groups. The JVP, which is now in a formal alliance with the president’s own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is exploiting the opportunity to foment communalism to divert ordinary working people from their own desperate plight. More than 200 Buddhist monks have enlisted under the banner of

the extreme right-wing Sihala Urumaya, renamed Hela Jathika Urumaya, to explicitly oppose any talks with the LTTE and to “save the nation” by transforming it into a Buddhist theocracy.

Kumaratunga and her political allies claim that they will respect the current ceasefire and are prepared to negotiate with the LTTE. But their denunciations of the “peace process” have an inexorable logic of their own. A politically charged atmosphere, poisoned by Sinhala chauvinist demagoguery, sets the stage for the resumption of the armed conflict, whatever the immediate outcome of the poll.

The SEP warns that the president’s decision to oust the elected government demonstrates that parliamentary democracy is increasingly being cast aside while new dictatorial forms of rule are being prepared. The lack of any opposition from any section of the political establishment, including the UNF, signifies that there is no serious constituency within ruling circles for the defence of basic democratic rights.

The president’s resort to autocratic methods is above all directed against the working class. None of the major parties is capable of satisfying the basic needs and aspirations of the majority of the population. All of them, including the JVP, support the imposition of the IMF and World Bank’s economic restructuring agenda that has driven down living standards and dramatically accelerated social inequality. A return to war would create a social disaster for working people, who have been forced to bear the brunt of a conflict that has cost tens of thousands of lives, maimed many more and turned hundreds of thousands into poverty-stricken refugees.

The SEP is advancing a socialist program in the April 2 elections to end the war, to defend democratic rights and to resolve the deepening social crisis confronting masses of ordinary working people. The SEP (like its predecessor the Revolutionary Communist League) is the only party that has intransigently opposed the war since its outbreak in 1983 and fought for the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil masses against successive Colombo governments.

As the present political crisis demonstrates, the ruling class has proven completely incapable of bringing the war to an end on a progressive basis. Both the UNP and the SLFP are deeply mired in the Sinhala communalism that produced the conflict in the first place, and have been responsible for its ruthless prosecution. The old “workers” organisations—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party—have adapted themselves to chauvinist politics for decades and are now part of the JVP-SLFP alliance.

The precondition for genuine peace and an end to communal conflict and animosity is to establish the political independence of the working class from all the bourgeois parties, their various apologists and the capitalist state.

Workers can place no faith in the so-called peace process or the promises of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the UNF. Under pressure from big business and the major powers, Wickremesinghe has been seeking to establish a peace deal with the LTTE in the form of a power-sharing arrangement between the country's Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites aimed at intensifying their mutual exploitation of the working class.

Far from ending chauvinism and racism, the various "peace" plans to devolve power to the North and East of the island will only institutionalise communal divisions, making future tensions and conflict inevitable. Both the government and the LTTE have mooted interim administrations that would be imposed undemocratically and entrench communally-based parties in positions of power. Like its counterparts in Colombo, the LTTE is committed to competing for foreign investment and transforming the island into a "Tiger economy".

To prevent a return to armed conflict, the working class must advance its own class solution to the war. The SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan military forces from the North and East of the island. The forcible maintenance of the unitary state has not only been accompanied by the suppression of the democratic rights of the Tamil minority but has led to the domination of militarism and basic attacks on democratic rights throughout the island.

The SEP calls on workers to decisively reject all forms of communalism and chauvinism and to champion the democratic rights of all, regardless of their ethnicity, language or religion. Any resolution to the 20-year civil war requires the total repudiation of the Sri Lankan constitution, which entrenches communalism and the autocratic powers now being exploited by Kumaratunga. The SEP advocates the establishment of a genuinely representative Constituent Assembly to enable ordinary working people, rather than cliques of capitalist politicians, to decide on all outstanding issues of democratic rights.

The defence of democratic rights is completely bound up with putting an end to the appalling social conditions confronting the majority of the island's population. All capitalist parties, including the JVP and LTTE, peddle the illusion that the social crisis can be resolved by adopting the IMF and World Bank demands for free market policies. Far from improving living standards, this agenda has produced a deepening gulf between rich and poor, the undermining and destruction of existing social services and the further deterioration of basic infrastructure.

The SEP insists that none of these pressing social problems can be resolved within the framework of the profit system. By unifying its struggles, defending the democratic rights of all and advancing its own socialist solution to end poverty and want, the working class will become a powerful pole of attraction for the urban poor and the rural masses and lay the basis for conquering political power. The SEP fights for the establishment of the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam as the means for reorganising society from top to bottom to meet the social needs of working

people rather than the profit requirements of the wealthy few.

Such a program is inconceivable without a struggle against imperialist domination, which finds its most predatory expression in the eruption of US militarism and its reckless drive for world hegemony. Washington's support for the "peace process" in Sri Lanka—like its backing for the Indo-Pakistani talks, its occupation of Afghanistan and its arms supplies to the Nepalese monarchy—is part of a broad strategy aimed at refashioning the economic and political affairs of South Asia to meet the financial and strategic interests of US imperialism.

Far from opposing US aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq, all of the parties in Sri Lanka, including the JVP and LTTE, have accommodated themselves, in one way or another, to Washington's agenda. The SEP unequivocally opposes the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops and personnel from these two countries.

The fundamental plank of the SEP's program is the international unity of the working class. We call on the hundreds of millions of workers throughout the Indian subcontinent and Asia, whose numbers have been vastly augmented by the globalisation of production processes, to join with their class brothers and sisters in the US, Europe and internationally in a joint offensive against imperialism. We stand shoulder to shoulder with our sister parties—the US Socialist Equality Party and the German Socialist Equality Party—who are conducting simultaneous election campaigns on the basis of a common internationalist perspective.

In the coming period the SEP will publish an election manifesto, setting out our program and policies. We call on all readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*—in Sri Lanka, Asia and internationally—to actively support and participate in our campaign. Help distribute our manifesto, which will be translated into Sinhala and Tamil, make plans to attend our public meetings, organise meetings at your workplace or local area for SEP speakers to address, contribute to our election fund and, above all, seriously study our program and perspective and apply to join the SEP.



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