

Socialist Equality Party election statement

The socialist alternative in the Sri Lankan elections

The Socialist Equality Party
19 March 2004

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon workers, young people and intellectuals, along with our supporters and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, to participate in the campaign for a socialist alternative in the April 2 Sri Lankan elections.

The SEP is standing a slate of 23 candidates in the Colombo district to defend the interests of the working class and advance a democratic and socialist program to oppose war and social reaction. The SEP's ticket is headed by Wije Dias, 63, the party's general secretary and a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board. Other candidates include factory workers, teachers and students, all of whom have a record of principled struggle in defence of the democratic and social rights of workers and the oppressed.

The SEP's campaign has a significance that reaches far beyond the boundaries of the island. Millions of workers throughout Asia, Latin America and Africa are being integrated into the global processes of production—as fodder for new forms of capitalist exploitation. But, like the Sri Lankan working class, they have been completely abandoned by their old leaderships and parties. The betrayals of these organisations are rooted, not simply in the corruption and cowardice of individual leaders, but in their national programs. Wedded to the nation-state system, they have all joined with their “own” governments in implementing “market reforms” and “economic restructuring”, collaborating in the ongoing destruction of democratic rights and social conditions and opposing any struggle against imperialist aggression and war.

In contrast, at the very centre of the SEP's perspective is the fight for internationalism. Through our campaign, we are seeking to develop a global counteroffensive against imperialism, uniting workers in Sri Lanka and Asia with their class brothers and sisters in America, Europe and around the world.

This election marks a definite turning point. It has been brought on as the result of a constitutional coup by President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who has used her autocratic executive powers to oust the elected United National Front (UNF) government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. But not one voice has been raised within ruling circles, including from Wickremesinghe himself, to condemn the anti-democratic character of the president's actions. This must constitute a sharp warning to the Sri Lankan people that whichever party comes to power will increasingly resort to extra-parliamentary forms of rule. What is becoming ever more apparent is that there is no significant constituency within ruling circles for the defence of democratic rights.

Kumaratunga represents the interests of those sections of the military and political establishment that are hostile to negotiations with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) because of the economic and political benefits they have derived from prosecuting the country's deeply unpopular civil war. Her communalist campaign against the UNF's

“peace process” has unleashed political forces that threaten to reignite the war. Kumaratunga's Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) has forged a formal alliance with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), while the Buddhist monks of the fascistic Jathika Hela Urumaya have also decided to stand candidates.

Wickremesinghe's perspective is no less reactionary. The UNF's “peace process” is intimately bound up with the sweeping “Regaining Sri Lanka” agenda of economic reform that has devastated the livelihoods of workers, farmers, students and others through privatisation and savage cutbacks of public sector programs and subsidies. As a result, the UNF has been rocked by a rising tide of anti-government strikes and protests that has provoked growing nervousness throughout the political establishment.

Seeking to exploit the discontent for its own purposes, the UPFA is posturing as an opponent of Wickremesinghe's measures. Its election manifesto is replete with populist rhetoric opposing privatisation and defending the public sector. One only has to recall, however, the 1994 election campaign, when Kumaratunga and the SLFP made exactly the same promises, only to accelerate economic restructuring after taking power. As for the JVP, while occasionally touting itself as “socialist” and “Marxist”, it is committed to maintaining the profit system and emulating China, Malaysia and India by transforming Sri Lanka into a cheap labour platform for global capital.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP), as well as the various “left” outfits like the Nava Sama Samaja Party are likewise playing a thoroughly pernicious role. Their entire campaign is oriented to convincing workers that they have no alternative but to support one or other of the two main bourgeois alliances, even as these alliances abandon democratic norms, attack living standards and threaten a renewal of civil war. While the NSSP portrays the UNF as the “lesser evil”, the LSSP and CP declare their preference for the UPFA, and have formally joined its ranks.

The SEP insists that whichever party wins the election, none of the critical issues confronting the working class will be resolved. Neither represents a “lesser evil”. The only way ordinary working people can begin to advance their own interests is by breaking out of the straitjacket of parliamentary politics altogether and establishing their independence from all factions of the capitalist class.

Our campaign aims to establish the political foundations for building a mass movement of workers and the rural poor for the revolutionary transformation of Sri Lankan society. Its central orientation is to develop a discussion about ideas and policies, not to win votes. The root cause of the present crisis lies neither with the prime minister nor the president, nor even their political parties, reactionary as they are. It resides in

fundamental contradictions wracking the world economy and the capitalist profit system itself.

The eruption of US militarism

The key factor in world politics today is the explosive eruption of US imperialism. Under the banner of the “war on terror”, Washington is seeking to establish its untrammelled hegemony over key strategic areas of the globe. The Bush administration’s turn to open bullying, economic blackmail and wars of aggression is not a sign of strength, but a desperate attempt to resolve the contradiction between world economy and the outmoded nation-state system by asserting the economic and strategic dominance of one state—the US—over all its rivals.

In the aftermath of the occupation of Afghanistan, Washington has sought to stamp its influence throughout the South Asian region. To the extent that regional conflicts represent an obstacle to its imperial aims, the Bush administration has decided they must be terminated. Rivals India and Pakistan have been dragged to the negotiating table; talks have been encouraged between the monarchy and Maoist rebels in Nepal, while Colombo and the LTTE have both been pressured to embrace the “peace process”. None of these initiatives has anything to do with bringing “peace and democracy” to the masses of South Asia. Rather, like the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, they are part of Washington’s pursuit of its own geo-political and strategic economic interests.

For the giant US corporations, the economic stakes are high. Like China, India has become a major target of transnational investment. Its apparently endless supply of cheap, educated labour has become the basis for the rapid expansion of software research and development, and service industries. Just as China has been dubbed “the workshop of the world”, India is becoming known as “the office of the world”. Moreover, South Asia is strategically located adjacent to the key resource-rich areas of Central Asia and the Middle East that are central to Washington’s ambitions.

Every section of Sri Lanka’s official establishment has unreservedly supported the US agenda, including the illegal wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. The main issue dominating “debate” within ruling circles has been how best to exploit the situation for their own ends. When, in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks, Kumaratunga failed to seize the opportunity presented by the US “war on terror” to force the LTTE to the negotiating table, big business orchestrated a virtual parliamentary coup. Key SLFP government ministers and MPs were enticed to cross the floor, precipitating new elections just one year after the previous poll.

Once installed, the newly elected UNF government quickly concluded a ceasefire deal and entered into negotiations with the LTTE. The “peace process” represented, not only an accommodation to Washington’s demands, but the deepest interests of Sri Lankan corporations. These were directly articulated in Wickremesinghe’s economic program “Regaining Sri Lanka”, which bemoaned the fact that, as a result of the 20-year civil war, Sri Lanka, one of the first countries to adopt open market policies in 1977, had been left behind. Now, on the back of the “peace process”, the government was seeking to transform the island into a key base for foreign investment. Sri Lanka was to become, as Economic Reform Minister Milinda Moragoda put it, the economic and financial gateway to India, just as Hong Kong had become the gateway to China.

“Regaining Sri Lanka” set out a sweeping set of restructuring measures to revamp the island’s antiquated and dilapidating infrastructure, slash government spending, corporatise or privatise state-owned enterprises and services, and strip away any remaining conditions and guarantees for workers. Above all, it sought to bring the war to an end as a prerequisite

for establishing close ties to the new hi-tech industries based in the Tamil-dominated south of India.

Thus the “peace process” was aimed, not at addressing the sufferings of ordinary working people, but at cutting a power-sharing deal between the island’s Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim elites that would help transform the country into what LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham called a new “Tiger economy”.

Having based itself throughout the past five decades on anti-Tamil chauvinism, however, the Colombo political establishment was deeply divided over the talks. The UNF government was attacked by sections of the media and state officials for making inadmissible concessions to the LTTE. At the same time, Kumaratunga, acting on behalf of the military top brass, the Buddhist hierarchy and those sections of business opposed to the influx of foreign capital, began undermining both the ceasefire and the negotiations. Within days of the LTTE putting its own “peace” proposals on the table, Kumaratunga seized three government ministries, including defence and, some three months later, sacked the government.

In the final analysis, the fate of the “peace process” will be determined, not by Kumaratunga or her Sri Lankan supporters, but in Washington and the world’s major capitals. So far, Wickremesinghe has enjoyed US backing and this has acted as something of a brake on his opponents. But no one should be under any illusions. If the Bush administration decides that the “terrorist” LTTE has become an impediment to its plans, it will not hesitate to sanction the use of military force against it and plunge the country back into civil war.

The dead-end of “national independence”

Sri Lankan politics has reached a watershed. The entire experiment with “national independence”, stretching back to 1948 when British colonialism formally handed power to the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, has proven a complete dead end. The history of the last 56 years constitutes a powerful vindication of the basic tenet of Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution: the incapacity of the bourgeoisie, in countries with a belated capitalist development, to satisfy even the most basic democratic aspirations and social needs of the majority of the population.

From the outset, the Ceylonese elites confronted a powerful working class whose most militant and courageous layers were organised in the Trotskyist movement. The new ruling class sought to preserve its privileged position by cleaving closely to the British empire and insisting that Ceylon be separate from the rest of British India. The British colonialists and their local proteges agreed that their respective interests would best be served by drawing a national border in the Palk Straits to try and insulate the island from the revolutionary convulsions taking place on the Indian subcontinent.

Time and again, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie responded to political upheaval and social unrest from below by whipping up communal tensions through the old tactic of “divide and rule”. The first act of the UNP government that came to power in 1948 was to strip citizenship rights from Tamil-speaking workers brought to work in the British tea and rubber plantations in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Overnight a million people—10 percent of the population—were declared “aliens” in a country where they had lived for decades. The 1960-64 and 1970-77 governments of the SLFP’s Sirima Bandaranaike, Kumaratunga’s mother, took the UNP’s policy even further. Under a deal with New Delhi, hundreds of thousands of Tamils were repatriated, in some cases forcibly, to squalid camps in southern India where many still reside.

While the Trotskyists of the LSSP intransigently opposed anti-Tamil chauvinism in the 1940s and 1950s, by 1964 they had succumbed to

nationalist political pressures and joined Bandaranaike's coalition government. This monumental betrayal encouraged the development of unrestrained communalism and was directly responsible for the emergence of petty-bourgeois tendencies espousing ethnic hatred and separatism—the JVP in the south and the LTTE in the north—thus laying the basis for civil war.

In 1971 the JVP, appealing to the frustrations of Sinhala rural youth, contrived an uprising against the SLFP-led coalition government. Bandaranaike used the security forces not only to crush the insurgency but to suppress wider discontent. Seeking to restore her base of support, she then instituted a series of measures discriminating in favour of Sinhalese in business, education and state sector jobs. These measures were crowned with a new communal constitution, enshrining Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhala as the official language.

Bandaranaike's program, which fuelled widespread resentment among Tamils, was taken up by the incoming UNP government of J.R. Jayewardene. Jayewardene took the first steps towards dismantling national economic regulation and opening up the economy to foreign investment. When this produced mounting opposition, he responded in the same way as Bandaranaike, fomenting Sinhala chauvinism and imposing antidemocratic measures. In 1978 he introduced a new constitution containing sweeping presidential powers. Five years later, in 1983, UNP thugs instigated anti-Tamil pogroms, precipitating the civil war that was to continue for two decades.

In 1987, confronting rising class struggles at home and pressure from India, Jayewardene attempted to negotiate an end to the war. He signed an accord with New Delhi to allow Indian "peace-keeping" troops into the North and East. Their task was to supervise the disarmament of the LTTE and the establishment of a limited form of devolution to a new provincial council structure. But the result was a disaster. In the North, the Indian forces came into conflict with the LTTE. In the South, the Indo-Lanka Accord provoked a sharp political crisis. The UNP began utilising the services of the JVP, which had unleashed a chauvinist campaign, to terrorise the working class. Once they had served their purpose, the government turned on its erstwhile JVP allies, murdering the organisation's top leaders and then, on the pretext of routing JVP supporters, launching a genocidal campaign against rural unrest in the south.

For ordinary people, the toll has been staggering. In a country where the total population has yet to reach 20 million, some 20,000 rural youth were slaughtered in the south in 1971, and another 60,000 during the repression of the late 1980s. The civil war has cost at least a further 60,000 lives and turned more than half a million into refugees. These figures alone are testimony to the complete failure of the ruling class and its nationalist perspective to provide the Sri Lankan people with the most basic requirements for a decent and secure life.

The civil war and socialism

The Socialist Equality Party, along with its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, is the only party that has consistently opposed the civil war from the outset. We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan military forces from the North and East as the only way to lay the basis for a genuine and lasting peace. In advancing its program to end the war, the SEP is guided by one overriding principle: the necessity for the working class to establish its political independence from the bourgeois parties and the capitalist state.

It is an illusion to believe that peace can be achieved under the auspices of Wickremesinghe or Kumaratunga. On the contrary, as long as they

remain tied to the UNP and the SLFP, the experiences of the past fifty years demonstrate that ordinary Sri Lankans will face the ever-present threat of war. Only the working class can provide a lasting solution—by appealing to the downtrodden rural masses, by unifying Tamil, Sinhalese, Muslim and Christian in a common rejection of all forms of communalism, chauvinism and separatism and by developing, on this basis, a mass revolutionary movement for a workers and farmers government.

The SEP opposes the maintenance of the unitary state by force of arms. Such a policy not only attacks the democratic rights of the Tamil people, but leads inevitably to the domination of militarism and the undermining of democratic rights throughout the country.

At the same time, the SEP opposes 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 like the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, the African National Congress and the Irish Republican Army, seeks to establish its own relations with global capital for the exploitation of the working class. Were the LTTE to take control of the North and East, it would immediately begin appealing to global investors to establish mutually beneficial arrangements at the direct expense of Tamil workers.

Likewise, the SEP opposes the various powersharing schemes that have been proposed as part of a "peace" deal. These plans have two common features: communalism and contempt for democratic rights. They all involve the imposition of an unelected, communally-based interim administration in the North and East that will collaborate with Colombo in implementing the dictates of global capital. The LTTE's own proposal specifically guarantees the organisation a majority, with sweeping powers over the administration of the North and East, including the hiring and firing of all officials and the appointment or disbanding of district committees, for five years. At the same time, the institutionalisation of divisions between the Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala communities will inevitably lay the basis for future tension and conflict.

To lay the basis for a genuine democratic settlement, the SEP advocates the convening of a Constituent Assembly charged with drawing up a constitution and settling all outstanding issues of democratic rights. The SEP's proposal has nothing in common with the cynical exercises conducted for the drawing up of the 1972 and 1978 Constitutions, which Kumaratunga wants to repeat after this election. A new constitution that genuinely expresses the interests of the majority must be drawn up by an assembly of representatives of ordinary working people, elected openly and democratically by and for them, not by cliques of capitalist politicians behind the backs of the masses.

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 requires the abrogation of all repressive and discriminatory laws, including the legal barriers that continue to deprive plantation Tamils of their full rights, together with the ending of the Public Security Act, Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

The Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam

The post-independence settlement on the Indian sub-continent, through which various local bourgeois were handed power as the rulers of separate national states, has created nothing short of a disaster for the working class and oppressed masses. For 50 years the ruling elites have sought to

maintain their rule by stoking up national and regional conflicts, most graphically expressed in the ongoing confrontation between the two nuclear-armed states of India and Pakistan.

The analysis of the Trotskyists, that national independence under bourgeois rule would not signify the end of imperialist domination but merely a change in its form, has been vindicated. For a period, during the post-war boom, this truth was somewhat blurred, as limited economic advance enabled bourgeois politicians of all stripes to hold out the prospect of economic and cultural advance. But the vast changes in world economy over the past 20 years—the processes of globalised production—have ended for all time the program of national economic development.

Not only have hundreds of millions of people throughout the sub-continent been condemned to a life of unspeakable poverty, but the unrelenting economic pressure exerted on each national and regional entity to compete for profits against its rivals has inflamed a whole series of fratricidal religious, ethnic and separatist tensions.

Only the struggle for the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of a United Socialist States of South Asia, can ensure the full economic and cultural development of all the peoples of this region. The global productive forces, whose rational development now makes possible the ending of poverty, hunger and oppression, must be freed from the confines of the nation-state and profit system, and utilised in the interests of all humanity. This requires the unification of the working class throughout the region and internationally in a common struggle for the development of a rationally-planned global socialist economy. This is the perspective for which the SEP fights, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution.

Deepening social inequality

In the 1940s and 50s, Sri Lanka was able to boast, as a result of the struggles of the working class, the most advanced welfare state in Asia, providing free education, health care, pensions and welfare. But in the course of the past half century, these gains have been progressively destroyed by successive UNP and SLFP governments.

Even the official statistics contained in Wickremesinghe's "Regaining Sri Lanka" document constitute a damning indictment of capitalist rule.

Between 25 percent and 40 percent of the population is affected by chronic and transitory poverty. If an income of \$US2 a day is used as the benchmark, more than 45 percent lives below the poverty line. Rural provinces, such as Uva and Northwestern, where most people survive from farming and fishing, record poverty rates of well over 50 percent.

More than two thirds of people in rural provinces have no access to electricity and half have no access to safe water or hygienic toilet facilities. Piped water is available to only 29 percent of the country's population and large-scale sewerage services exist only in the capital Colombo.

Around 300,000 mainly young rural women labour in the country's textile and garment sweatshops in order to send money back to support their families. Another 400,000 men and women provide financial support to their families from their work as cheap migrant labour in the Middle East, mostly in menial, poorly paid posts. Other families are dependent on income from the 200,000 young men and women who have joined the armed forces in the absence of any alternative employment.

In the war-torn North and East, which are excluded from national studies, up to 40 percent of the population has been displaced. Many continue to live in inadequate, unsanitary conditions in badly-resourced

refugee camps. One third to one half of all homes have been damaged or destroyed. One out of every 12 households reported a family member killed as a direct result of the conflict. Among the poorest households, the ratio was one in seven. One study in Trincomalee district found that 27 percent of all children under 5 were stunted, 26 percent were wasted and 50 percent were underweight.

While the official unemployment rate is rising, 95 percent of those below the poverty line are "working poor". Included in this category are the majority of Tamil-speaking plantation workers, who work long hours for low wages and live in cramped, unsanitary conditions. In Colombo, wages of \$US30 to \$60 per month are common.

At the other end of the social divide, the major banks and corporations have reaped substantial profits. For the first three quarters of last year, the corporate group Sri Lanka Hayleys Ltd recorded a 605.3 million rupee after-tax profit while the DFCC bank boosted its profits by 16 percent. For 2003, the Seylan Bank Group netted a 1.026 billion rupee post-tax profit. Most companies paid no tax at all. Out of 32,000 registered companies, 9,000 filed tax returns and only 2,850 paid any tax.

"Regaining Sri Lanka" admits that while economic growth averaged 5.1 percent in the 1990s, it failed "to bring about a marked reduction in the poverty level. In other words, economic growth has not automatically trickled down to the poor." This amounts to an open declaration that a decade of market reform under UNP and SLFP governments alike has only served to exacerbate social inequality.

Not surprisingly, the brunt of the UNF's policy has been borne by the working class. "Regaining Sri Lanka" noted that 17 percent of the labour force is employed in the public sector, including state-owned enterprises, "giving Sri Lanka the highest ratio of public sector employees in Asia". The UNF government has set out to redress this situation by accelerating the corporatisation and privatisation program carried out under Kumaratunga. Tens of thousands of jobs have been destroyed and many more will follow as the planned restructuring in the docks, railways, electricity, state banks and other sectors proceeds. Last November's budget foreshadowed the axing of 100,000 public sector jobs in 2004 and another 200,000 by 2006.

Every sector is being opened up to "market forces". During 2002, government expenditure on public health was slashed from 1.7 percent to 1.5 percent of GDP and public education spending from 2.5 percent to 2.3 percent—to encourage the growth of private services. Teacher training, for example, has been contracted out to private agencies. In 2004 alone, 300 public schools have been declared "unviable" and shut down. The UNF has slashed fertiliser subsidies to small farmers—increasing the price of this crucial agricultural input in one stroke from 350 to 950 rupees a bag. Thousands of farmers have seen their livelihoods destroyed, leading directly to a rise in the number of rural suicides.

A socialist program for the working class

The SEP advocates an economic system whose organising principle is satisfying the human needs of the population as a whole, not the creation of profit and the accumulation of vast personal wealth for a tiny minority. To begin to establish the economic foundations for such a social transformation, we advocate the nationalisation of all large banks and financial institutions, the transformation of all large-scale industrial and manufacturing corporations, including those operating within the Free Trade Zones, into publicly-owned and controlled enterprises, and the placing of all critical natural resources under public ownership and control.

*** Secure and well-paid jobs for all**

Unemployment is endemic to the present economic order. Young people are the most severely affected, with the jobless rate for 14-18-year-olds now standing at 36 percent and for 19-25-year-olds at 30 percent. This means that the skills and potential of an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 university graduates—almost an entire generation—are being squandered. At the same time, nearly a million children aged 5-17 are compelled to engage in some form of labor to assist their poverty-stricken families. Half are under the age of 15.

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 to fund a program of public works, which will create hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs and build urgently needed public housing, schools, hospitals, roads and irrigation schemes—especially in the war-ravaged North and East of the country.

Real wages have continued to drop—by over 10 percent among private sector employees and agricultural workers in the period 1999-2002. The SEP proposes the immediate raising of the minimum wage for all workers to the monthly equivalent of 10,000 rupees (approximately \$US100), automatically indexed to the cost of living.

We advocate ending all forms of child labour and 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**

All young people must be allowed to develop their skills and creativeness to the full. At present the education system is riven by inequality—children in working class and rural areas are forced into badly equipped and understaffed public schools, while the sons and daughters of the wealthy enjoy all the benefits of advanced resources, methods and technology that money can buy. The SEP advocates a vast expansion of the public system to provide free, high quality education, up to and including university level to 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, as well as to sporting and arts facilities.

*** For universal, decent health care and welfare programs**

Despite revolutionary developments in medical science, thousands of people continue to die every year in Sri Lanka from 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 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 immediately performed in a private hospital.

The SEP advocates a massive program for developing 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.

Poverty, lack of sufficient food and malnutrition remain widespread. In 2000, the prevalence of stunting among children under the age of five throughout the country was 13.5 percent, of wasting 14 percent; and of being underweight 29.4 percent. Maternal malnutrition is also chronic: during pregnancy 35 percent of women were anaemic and the average weight gain was substantially less than the minimum requirement. The limited existing programs, which are widely abused for political ends, must be replaced by a universal welfare and pension system that ensures an adequate income for all.

*** 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 decent housing beyond the reach of masses of people. Within the city limits of Colombo, 51 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 advocates 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 that has served to exacerbate 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 advocates that state land be made available to all landless farmers, regardless of their ethnicity. All past debts amassed by poor farmers and fishermen must be cancelled while bank loans, agricultural equipment, fertilisers and chemicals and fishing gear must be provided on easily affordable terms. Subsidies on agricultural inputs such as fertilisers must be reinstated and increased. The price of agricultural produce should be guaranteed to ensure a decent standard of living for farming families.

Socialism and the Sri Lankan working class

The Socialist Equality Party is based on the great traditions of the international socialist movement—egalitarianism, internationalism and the material and spiritual liberation of mankind from oppression and want—which are embodied today in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

In 1917 a mass popular movement in Russia, guided by the program of scientific socialism, overthrew capitalism and established the Soviet Union. While the Russian revolution was part of, and inspired, a broader international socialist movement, the defeat of revolutionary struggles elsewhere created enormous pressures, expressed in the isolation of the first workers state and the emergence of a repressive, bureaucratic apparatus, headed by Joseph Stalin. Abandoning the internationalism of the Bolshevik Party, Stalin advanced the anti-Marxist perspective of “building socialism in a single country”. On the basis of this nationalist conception, the Stalinist bureaucracy betrayed the October Revolution, destroyed workers' democracy, liquidated the genuine Marxists and subverted the revolutionary struggles of the working class around the world. By 1991 the reactionary logic of Stalinism and its collaboration with imperialism had culminated in the breakup of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism.

Our movement bases itself on the legacy of the best, most courageous and far-sighted representatives of the working class who continued the struggle for socialist internationalism. The greatest embodiment of this tradition was Leon Trotsky, a leader of the Russian revolution who led the fight against the betrayals of Stalinism and laid the basis for the rebirth of the international workers movement through the founding in 1938 of the Fourth International.

These historic struggles struck deep roots in the working class of Sri Lanka and South Asia. In the 1940s, based on the political struggle waged

by Trotsky against Stalinism, the Sri Lankan Trotskyists played a key role in founding the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India, applying the principles of Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution to the development of a democratic and socialist perspective for the working class and oppressed masses of the Indian subcontinent. In the aftermath of the war, and based on this perspective, the Trotskyists rejected the phoney "independence" handed down by London to the local capitalist class in Colombo and opposed the disastrous partition of the Indian subcontinent along communal lines.

Central to all the gains made by Sri Lankan workers in the 1940s and 1950s was the political struggle waged by the BLPI and then the LSSP for the international unity of the working class and its determined opposition to all forms of racism and chauvinism. The LSSP became a beacon for the oppressed in Sri Lanka and for workers around the world, particularly in Asia. The problems confronting the working class in Sri Lanka today can be traced directly to the LSSP's renunciation of internationalism and its adaptation to the communal politics of the local bourgeoisie, which culminated in its 1964 betrayal.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner to the SEP, was founded in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in a direct political struggle against the LSSP's descent into national opportunism. For three-and-a-half decades, the RCL and SEP have intransigently opposed all forms of chauvinism, discrimination and oppression, championed the democratic rights of the working class and rural poor and sought to theoretically clarify the dangers posed by all forms of nationalist politics.

The challenge facing the working class in Sri Lanka and throughout the region is to revive and develop the great socialist traditions and ideas that animated the early struggles of the BLPI and the LSSP. Central to that task is the assimilation of the lessons of the strategic experiences of the international working class throughout the twentieth century, including the critical struggles in India and Sri Lanka.

We urge all those who recognise the urgent need for genuine peace and the transformation of society along socialist lines to actively support our election campaign. This means helping to publicise our candidates and meetings, distributing and discussing our election material and encouraging the widest possible audience for the *World Socialist Web Site*, the internet centre of the ICFI.

Above all, we call on all those who agree with our program and perspective to join and build the Socialist Equality Party as the new political party of the working class.



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