

Sri Lankan SEP meeting warns of the danger of renewed civil war

Our reporters

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a public lecture on September 17 in Colombo to warn of the dangers of a return to open civil war and to indict the entire political establishment for its failure to bring genuine peace to the island.

Prior to the meeting, the SEP campaigned in working class areas in Colombo distributing several thousand copies of the SEP's statement "Sri Lanka returns to the brink of war" along with other *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) articles, including on the US occupation of Iraq. A number of WSWS readers responded positively to the meeting notice posted on the site and to the SEP statement.

About 100 workers, young people and others—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—attended the meeting, listened carefully to the speakers and engaged in discussion at the conclusion. Wije Dias, the SEP general secretary and a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board, delivered the main report. K. Ratnayake, also a WSWS International Editorial Board member, chaired the meeting.

In his introductory remarks, Ratnayake pointed out that conflict is already taking place in the East of the country where sections of the military are backing attacks on the Liberation Tigers Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by a breakaway faction led by V. Muralitharan (Karuna). President Chandrika Kumaratunga's own ally, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), is engaged in a provocative campaign against attempts to revive peace talks between Colombo and the LTTE.

The chairman referred to the remarks of Norwegian official Erik Solheim who was in Colombo last week to attempt to revive the peace process. After meeting with Kumaratunga and LTTE political wing chief S.P. Thamilchelvan, an exasperated Solheim declared: "Leave aside the Norwegians, even Lord Buddha or Jesus Christ couldn't solve this problem."

Ratnayake stated: "Though Solheim did not and could not explain why this situation has emerged and threatens war, his statement reveals the communal quagmire in which Sri Lankan ruling elite is trapped. Both Thamilchelvan and Kumaratunga insist they want to talk, but can't. While the ruling class has no solution, the working class has to advance a socialist perspective to the stop the war and to defend democratic rights and living and social conditions."

The speaker explained that the country's deepening economic crisis had intensified with rising oil prices, drought and a declining rupee. Kumaratunga's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government was not able to keep its promises made prior to the April election, provoking growing strikes and protests. Sinhala chauvinist parties such as the JVP were deliberately stirring up communal sentiments and thus heightening the danger of war in order to divert and divide this opposition.

Wije Dias delivered a comprehensive report on the background to the present political crisis. He pointed out that the previous United National Front (UNF) government had signed a ceasefire in early 2002 under pressure from the major powers and business leaders. But the prospect of a deal with the LTTE deeply destabilised the Colombo political establishment which had always relied on whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class and prop up its own rule.

Dias explained that six rounds of talks were held between the UNF government and the LTTE—the first exactly two years ago on September 16, 2002. But the talks had rapidly stalled. He noted that the record of the so-called peace process boiled down to the fact that 18 of the 24 months were spent not trying to find a solution to the war but in preparing for the next round.

"The months of peace talks did not address any of the burning social problems facing people affected by the war. Tens of thousands of Tamils were still barred from returning to their homes and their lands remained fenced off as High Security Zones by the military. Promised rehabilitation works did not even begin. The sole purpose of the peace process insisted on by foreign and local investors was to create the conditions to exploit the island's cheap labour and resources," Dias said.

"The so-called peace process has, once again, revealed the reliance of the ruling class on communalism and repression. In fact, these political methods have increasingly been resorted to with the growing penetration of finance capital. With the integration of more backward countries into the globalised economy, communal conflicts have become a widespread phenomena, particularly in the 'Third World'."

Dias noted that the spread of armed conflict was reflected in the massive arms sales to "Third World" countries. "The ratio

of arms imports by developed, as against so-called developing countries, was 70 to 30 in 1987. By 1997 the proportion was 52 to 48. Sri Lanka is one country among those making huge arms purchases,” he said.

The speaker cited a recent study by Professor P.R. Chari, director of the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies in New Delhi, who pointed to the increasingly political role played by the military. “New forms of praetorianism and authoritarianism are plainly visible in the developing countries; the military plays a pivotal role in guiding their governance processes and is playing independent role.”

Dias explained that after two decades of war the Sri Lankan military was playing an increasingly independent role in defending its interests. One of the main reasons for the breakdown of the peace talks was the provocative actions of the military, in sinking several LTTE vessels and refusing to dismantle the High Security Zones.

Kumaratunga supported the military and encouraged the JVP in its chauvinist campaign against the peace process as a means of undermining the rival UNF. But after her UPFA won the election, she called in the Norwegian mediators to attempt to restart peace talks as a means of gaining desperately needed international aid and investment. She soon found, however, that she had unleashed forces she does not control.

Dias pointed to the fact that, while Kumaratunga is seeking peace negotiations, the navy’s chief Admiral Daya Sandagiri, who directly oversaw the naval provocations, has just been appointed as overall chief of defence staff. On assuming command, Sandagiri immediately called for greater military spending. “If the Sri Lankan Navy had been properly equipped and provided with the required manpower, it would have countered the LTTE threat much more effectively and nipped the problem of war in the bud,” Sandagiri stated.

Dias also examined the destabilising role of the US and its ally India on the island. Washington backed the so-called peace process as part of its broad plans to dominate the region, but only if the LTTE was prepared to accept a completely subordinate role. The speaker noted that both the US and India have been strengthening the Sri Lankan military and thus encouraging organisations like the JVP to campaign against the peace process. For its part, the LTTE was seeking an accommodation with US imperialism and Colombo that would enable the Tamil bourgeoisie a greater role in exploitation of the working class.

Dias traced the origins of the war to the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) which abandoned the principles of socialist internationalism in 1964 by joining a bourgeois government and thereby directly encouraged the growth of communally-based politics and organisations such as the LTTE and JVP. “The problem of war and the defence of democratic rights cannot be addressed without the working class reasserting its political independence and building a socialist movement,” Dias stressed. He concluded by outlining the

SEP’s socialist perspective and encouraging the audience to read the WSWs and join the SEP.

The lecture was followed by questions and answers and further informal discussion. A number of young people spoke to SEP members enthusiastically about the lecture, indicating that it had raised many issues and questions to think about. Several workers made comments to WSWs reporters.

A pump operator from the Water Board said the meeting was very important and a burning issue. “The JVP is giving lectures on the topic ‘Who are the enemies of the peace.’ But the content of their lectures is the call for war. I voted for the JVP in the 2004 election because I didn’t have any other choice. I disagreed with their policies on the ethnic problem. During the past four months of their rule, they [the JVP] have sky-rocketed the cost of living. If they start the war, they will put all the financial and other burdens on our shoulders. We want to end this war for a better life.”

A Tamil retired worker from the cement corporation said war should be prevented in all circumstances. “If the war comes there will be a big crisis. This time it will be a large disaster. There will be a big economic crisis and both sides would face the defeat,” he said. While he had illusions that peace talks might offer a solution, he said that he had attended the lecture because he wanted to know the SEP’s opinion.

A teacher from Kandy, who has been following the SEP’s analysis for some time, said: “I have explained to my staff members and other friends and neighbors these things. As you always point out in the articles published in the WSWs, the political independence of the working class is the most important thing. Through the WSWs and these types of lectures, I think, we can establish that opinion in the masses.”



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