

US SEP presidential candidate Bill Van Auken addresses two meetings in Sri Lanka

A correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held two successful meetings in Colombo and Kandy over the last week addressed by Bill Van Auken, the presidential candidate for the SEP's sister party in the US, on the Iraq war and the US election.

The meeting at the New Town Hall in central Colombo last Saturday was attended by more than 250 people from all over the island and all walks of life. Plantation workers, who travelled by bus for hours from the tea estate areas of Hatton and Bandarawela, were in the audience with workers, academics, students and office workers from the capital. Villagers and workers from Ambalangoda and Matara in the south of the island were also present, together with a delegation of 10 fishermen from Jaffna, who had to spend 12 hours on the bus and train and pass through army and LTTE roadblocks to reach Colombo.

Many in the audience were SEP members and supporters, but a significant number also came as a result of the SEP's campaign. Some had read posters or leaflets; others came across the meeting on the *World Socialist Web Site* or heard about it via the media coverage of Van Auken's visit. While no other party in Sri Lanka is holding meetings against the US occupation of Iraq, there is widespread opposition to it.

TV and print journalists came to hear Van Auken speak. The popular Sirasa TV network filmed a substantial portion of the meeting and broadcast a short item on its national news segment on Sunday. The network's English and Tamil language channels—MTV and Shakthi—did the same.

The second meeting was held on Monday at Peradeniya University near Kandy, 115 km inland from Colombo. Sponsored by the student Philosophical Society, it attracted a great deal of interest from students and academic staff. Well over a 100 people attended, the majority of whom were students, both from the university and also local high schools. Many had little or no contact with the SEP prior to the meeting and came despite the pressure of exams. According to one of the university lecturers who attended, the gathering was the largest political meeting at the campus for some time.

The meeting took place despite the efforts of the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), the student wing of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), to block the SEP's campaign. The JVP, a party based on Sinhala communalism and populist demagoguery, attempts to portray itself to students as "socialist" and "Marxist". Now in government for the first time, the JVP has taken no stand against the illegal US invasion of Iraq. On the day

of the meeting, IUSF members approached SEP campaigners and insisted they stop. Unable to give any reason for their anti-democratic actions, they simply ordered the SEP members "not to bring politics to the university" and warned they would use force.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias chaired the meeting in Colombo. He welcomed Bill Van Auken as well as representatives of the SEP's sister parties in Australia and Canada, and sympathisers from India who were also in the audience.

"The presence of the presidential candidate of the US SEP to address workers and the oppressed in Sri Lanka epitomises the internationalist character of the campaign waged by our world movement and the *World Socialist Web Site*," he said. "We recognise that the issue of electing the US president is a world event. This is because the decisions and actions of the chief executive of America affect the lives and fate of the masses throughout the world more than ever before."

Dias pointed out that, in the aftermath of the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the ruling elites throughout the subcontinent had demonstrated their cowardly subservience to Washington. During the Cold War, for instance, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party, part of the current ruling coalition, used to engage in anti-imperialist rhetoric with the support of Moscow and Beijing. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the SLFP has abandoned any pretence of independence.

Dias explained that the SEP was the only party in Sri Lanka that had consistently opposed the illegal US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and campaigned for an international socialist program for workers on the island and throughout the region.

Van Auken opened his address by answering those who asked why the SEP decided to send its presidential candidate to address audiences in Europe and South Asia in the weeks directly before the vote in America.

"One Colombo media pundit suggested that it was because I could get more press coverage here. This begs the obvious question of why an American presidential candidate would look for media exposure in Sri Lanka in the first place. I hardly think it's going to win me many more votes.

"No, the decision flows from my party's internationalist perspective. The most important task of our campaign in the 2004 election is to fight for the international unification of the working class and to represent the interests of workers in every country in the course of this campaign."

Van Auken explained that the actions taken by US imperialism

had life and death consequences for billions of people around the world. The US has asserted the right to conduct “preventative”—that is unprovoked—wars wherever it pleases, posing direct threat to countries throughout the world. Moreover, through agencies such as the IMF and World Bank, Washington dictates austerity policies to governments in countries like Sri Lanka.

In the course of his speech, Van Auken explained why the Democratic Party presidential candidate John Kerry offered no alternative and on all fundamental questions—including the Iraq war—agreed with the policies of President Bush, offering only to implement them more efficiently. He detailed the deep social divide between rich and poor in America and the ongoing attacks on basic democratic rights—including the right to stand third-party candidates.

The SEP’s candidate explained that there was no national solution for the American working class or for workers of the rest of the world on any issue. In arguing for the necessity of workers to unite, he pointed out that the policies of the political establishment were in direct contradiction to the historic traditions of America. He outlined the long history of struggle from the first American Revolution to the Civil War and the working class battles of the twentieth century that is the heritage of American workers.

Summing up, Van Auken warned that the economic, political and social contradictions of capitalism were giving rise to a new period of revolutionary struggles. “We are concentrated not on the ballot boxes on November 2, but on what will follow this election, which will be a period of intense crisis for whichever administration takes control of the White House.

“We are fighting for the emergence of a genuine independent workers’ movement, which can arise only on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. We can only do this as part of a world party that consciously unites the struggles of workers in every country.”

The entire speech was translated simultaneously into Sinhala and Tamil, ensuring that everyone in the room was able to follow. That in itself marked the SEP’s meeting from virtually any other political event in Sri Lanka, which are all dominated by communalism. The speech and translations took some three hours but the audience showed few signs of impatience and participated eagerly in the subsequent question and answer session. A lively discussion also followed the lecture in Kandy.

Questions ranged over a number of issues from the civil war in Sri Lanka to the SEP’s attitude to the Israeli attacks on Palestinians and the nature of the antiwar movement in the US. Wije Dias explained the party’s perspective on a working class solution to the Sri Lankan war and also answered a question on its attitude towards the peasantry.

One of the questioners in Colombo had read through the US SEP’s election manifesto, hundreds of which had been sold as a Sinhala pamphlet in the course of the campaign for the meeting. He quoted the portion of the SEP’s program which states: “Property rights must be subordinated to social rights. This does not mean the nationalisation of everything, or the abolition of small or medium-sized businesses, which are themselves

victimised by giant corporations and banks.” He then asked what limitations the SEP would place on nationalisation.

Van Auken explained that the SEP’s manifesto spoke about the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy, such as big corporations and banks. It was “neither necessary nor advisable to call for the nationalisation of all small businesses.” He pointed out that small business was in conflict with the major corporations, citing the large numbers of bankruptcies occurring every year. He noted the large numbers of small businesses that exist in Sri Lanka. The working class should not alienate this significant layer of the population, he said, but had to win them over to its side in its struggle for socialism.

The speaker referred back to a quote from the American president Abraham Lincoln cited in the course of the lecture. Castigating the pro-slavery Democratic Party, Lincoln had declared that it held “the liberty of one man to be absolutely nothing when in conflict with another man’s right to property.” We turn that inside out, Van Auken said, saying that private property will only be allowed to the extent that it does not infringe on liberty.

“If a certain business is incapable of paying salaries, extending the benefits, maintaining the conditions as decided democratically by a workers’ government then there will be no basis for that business.” This was the basic standard any socialist society would need, he said, adding that assistance would be offered to help small businesses.

Responding to the question on the US antiwar movement, Van Auken described the extent of the protests in the US and around the world prior to the invasion of Iraq. “The US saw the biggest demonstrations in its history,” he said. “But as we know they didn’t have any effect on Bush.” He described how the Democratic primaries had been manipulated to ensure that Kerry was installed as the party’s candidate to block any outlet for the widespread antiwar sentiment. The SEP has opposed all those who promote Kerry as an alternative to Bush and insisted that the antiwar movement will have to make a break from the two-party system.

Formal proceedings at both meetings were followed by animated discussion by many who stayed to speak to Van Auken or SEP members. Many left their contact details for further dialogue with the SEP. The collection at the Colombo meeting was 4,400 rupees—the monthly wage for an average worker—and 5,500 rupees worth of literature was sold at the two meetings. Copies of the Sinhala and Tamil editions of the *World Socialist Web Site* quarterly journal were in demand, along with books and pamphlets on the history of Trotskyism.

The full version of Bill Van Auken’s speech to the Colombo meeting will be published tomorrow.



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