

Following the SEP meetings in Colombo and Kandy

# Sri Lankans speak about the Iraq war, the US election and internationalism

**Our reporters**  
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The two meetings addressed by US Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate Bill Van Auken in Sri Lanka were followed by animated discussion among those who took part. Members of the audience congregated around Van Auken, gathered at the literature table to speak to SEP members and spoke among themselves. The discussions—in Tamil, Sinhala and English—only finally ended when the halls were locked.

For many people who attended, details of the political situation in the US and the conditions facing the American working class were a revelation. But the internationalist perspective presented in the speech, which also informed the character of the meeting, was what drew most comment. In a country that has been torn apart by communal bloodshed and war for decades, it struck a chord. As one woman who came up to Van Auken after the meeting in Kandy at Peradeniya University said: “This is what we need here—internationalism.”

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of those who attended the meetings in Colombo and Kandy.

**Chanaka**, a young student from Piliyandala, explained: “I had grand ideas about America. My friends too. We thought there [in the US] people have democracy and a very prosperous country. Today I came to know that is not so. There is no democracy as such. And people are getting poorer.

“Regarding Kerry too. We had the impression that Kerry was really opposing Bush. I think all these wrong ideas have been created by the mass media here. I learned how the two-party system in the US works to maintain the system. Here in Sri Lanka similar things are happening. One time the UNF [United National Front] is in power and another time this government [United Peoples Freedom Alliance].

“We learnt something about Iraq from the media but they are not critical. When I heard today’s lecture I was able to better understand why the US waged this war. It is for its interests.”

**A young schoolboy** from Colombo said: “When I was sitting in the audience I felt very strongly that I was participating in a real international working class event for the first time. And I think others also felt like that. At the same time, I thought about the meeting in London addressed by Van Auken last week. No doubt the London audience felt the same. Like us they would be thinking that we are in the same boat with workers all over the world. I am optimistic that we can unite workers internationally on a common program.”

**A journalist**, who was sent to cover the SEP meeting in Colombo, explained to the WSW: “As a journalist this is the first time in my career that I have shot news footage of this type of international meeting. I go to many meetings that are called international, but every

speaker at these meetings speaks on behalf of their country and their government. Bill Van Auken, however, doesn’t speak on behalf of America. He speaks on behalf of working class, the international working class.

“Many times during the lecture, I forgot my job and couldn’t operate the video camera properly because I was attracted to the marvellous ideas of Bill Van Auken. I put the camera on the tripod on a fixed angle and sat in the audience to listen to the lecture. The picture of the American society painted by the media is completely different. I really appreciated the scientific way of analysing the actual political, social and economic situation in America with shocking facts and figures. In other meetings in Sri Lanka, commonly they blame each other with hollow arguments without any scientific approach. Yes, this was really international.”

**Sunil**, a professional photographer from Matara, commented on the patience of the audience, who sat as Van Auken’s lecture delivered in English was translated into Sinhala and Tamil. “I can’t imagine how the audience listened attentively to the lecture for four hours but I looked around and saw how seriously they listened.

“I think the secret of this extraordinary attention is the power of the ideas delivered by Bill Van Auken. If you speak the truth it is very powerful. Van Auken, a man from America, speaks against the foreign and domestic policy of his country with facts and figures. It was marvellous. If an American speaks against the massacre by America in Iraq, it touches the heart and is thought provoking.”

**Jayatilake** is a branch leader in a union in the Petroleum Corporation of Sri Lanka that has been involved in an ongoing struggle against privatisation. The union is controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a party based on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and populist rhetoric, which is now part of the ruling coalition.

“I realised [during the lecture] why the JVP is completely silent on Iraq invasion. They bow to the interests of the imperialist powers, especially the US. Now under their government, the Sri Lankan armed forces are engaging in joint exercises with American forces. They are willing to get military support from the US against the LTTE. As Van Auken said, with a nationalistic program any movement can’t go far in this global era. This is what has happened to the JVP.”

**Sampath Perera**, a welfare officer, explained: “What we knew about the US presidential election was that there were only two candidates—Bush and Kerry. They are the two sides of the same coin. Through this campaign we now know there are other candidates, especially a socialist. That is very important.

“Actually the world situation is becoming internationalised. The Iraq war is an international issue. The US is going to establish their hegemony over the world and the Iraq invasion is an initial step in their colonial enterprise. In that sense, if you want to defeat this, you must organise an international movement on the basis of international socialism. This is what I assimilated through the lecture.”

**A. Perera** said: “Today I enjoyed a live experience of America. Previously I thought that the American working class enjoyed privileged and luxurious lives. Bill Van Auken destroyed this picture and painted a new one, which represents the real situation faced by American workers who are losing their jobs, social conditions and democratic rights. Now we know workers all over the world are facing the same problems.”

**K. Sabashini**, an Arts student, said: “From this meeting I got a real idea about the American political situation and about the Iraq war. This is the first time I have heard that there are different ideas in America which are against the two established parties. But only two parties [the Democrats and Republicans] are allowed to make their ideas public; others have no opportunity. That is very unfair and has to be changed.

“The SEP’s program to unite the American working class and world working class is very important. Inside Iraq, there are many innocent people who are dying because of the American invasion. I agree that the world’s people have to fight for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Iraq. All the oppressed masses have to unite and fight against their rulers to establish equality.”

**Dankotuwa**, a printing worker who regularly reads the WWS, explained: “I came to this meeting because I am against the Iraq war. I have learned from the meeting about the Democratic Party’s role in the US elections. Kerry is saying the war has to be organised more efficiently. That is no different from Bush.

“The world economy is dominated by a very small quantity of big businessmen. Throughout the world there are workers losing their jobs. As a result of the Iraq war, oil prices are going up. It affects underdeveloped countries like Sri Lanka very much. The profit system has to be abolished and only then can people win their rights.”

**Nuwan**, an apparel worker, said: “It is very interesting to know there is a candidate in the US elections to represent the oppressed masses. Inside Sri Lanka the whole media covers up the real situation. So I think this meeting is very important in publicising the truth.

“I oppose the Iraq war. All the media in Sri Lanka is covering up what is happening in the world. The capitalist class dominates the media. So I think your party is playing a very important role in exposing what is happening. I don’t know much about the SEP’s policies but I want to study them.”

**Mahesh**, a worker at the Ceylon Oxygen Company, said: “It is important to understand what has happened to this country, to America and the world. I learned a lot about the war and the American situation. The war on Iraq is a war for oil and a war of banditry. Everyone at our work place is against the war on Iraq.

“We can stop this war only by uniting the working class internationally. I think the presence in this meeting of workers, youth and intellectuals is a good sign for such a movement. There should be a revolution in America and in Sri Lanka and other countries. In Sri Lanka we find several bourgeois and petty bourgeois parties. But we have to build a genuine left party.”

**S. Srikanth**, a school student from Chilaw, met the SEP a couple of months ago. “The US elections impact all over the world. The governments of other countries, including Sri Lanka, function

according to the decisions taken by the US administration. In the meantime, Sri Lanka is facing a deepening economic crisis. So I came here to find out what solution socialism proposes.

“We thought that the problem of a growing number of poor people was only for undeveloped countries. But now we understand that a small group in the US takes the biggest share of wealth and the majority of people suffer poverty.

“Some of our schoolmates make jokes when we talk about politics but we keep explaining that there are serious problems. Even if we finish our education we don’t have any prospects. Because of the domination of capitalism, we don’t have any chance for a future.

“Two parties have been ruling Sri Lanka for 50 years. Both parties do the same thing. They fulfill the interests of the wealthy few. The majority of people receive nothing. Now I believe only by building socialism can the majority of people have their needs met.”

**B. Sivakaran**, a first year Arts student, explained: “The US said that the former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein should be executed for his crimes against his own people. Of course he carried out atrocities but the US is destroying the country through this outrageous war.

“Under globalisation, while US corporations are exploiting the cheap labour and resources of backward countries, the US military is occupying these countries—like Iraq. The US is using its veto power in the UN Security Council in favour of its war. A genuinely democratic country never needs a veto power.”

**Adhesa Perera**, a 16-year-old student, came to the Colombo meeting after his father brought an SEP leaflet home. He explained that he wanted to know what was going on in the US. “We are told that the US is a fine country but as Bill Van Auken explained there is a two-party monopoly in the US. The rulers there do not act according to the ideas of the majority of the people. There is rule by the super rich. It is like Sri Lanka where two capitalist parties rule the country.”

Perera said he followed world events closely through CNN. “Recently I have been interested in the Bush-Kerry debate, the Iraq war and other US international interventions. I watched the Bush-Kerry debate. Both engaged in mud-slinging and justifying the Iraq war. Having voted for Iraq war, now Kerry is criticising the war.

“Some 80 percent of the world’s population shares only 14 percent of the world’s GDP. More than a half the world’s population lives in poverty. In this situation every step carried out by the world’s superpower has implications for the whole world. They can influence problems in Sri Lanka. Capitalist parties in the US support only the capitalist parties here. Capitalist parties rule all over the world.”



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