Sri Lankan students and railway workers discuss US election campaign

Our correspondent
22 October 2004

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka campaigned last weekend among rail workers and university students for two public meetings in Colombo and Kandy to be addressed by Bill Van Auken, the presidential candidate of the US SEP, on the Iraq war and the US elections.

While the Sri Lankan media and the major political parties remain virtually silent on the implications of the US subjugation of Iraq and the American presidential elections, ordinary working people have deep concerns about the consequences of US militarism. The SEP campaign produced a lively discussion over a range of issues and disagreements, and several people were particularly struck by its international character.

Despite the fact that students at Colombo University were studying for exams, a number stopped to discuss the meetings and the Iraq war with SEP campaigners.

A postgraduate student said he followed the US invasion of Iraq closely. "The WMD was a big lie and there was no connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. Yes, to some extent, I know the real reasons for the Iraq invasion. The economic crisis of America is the major reason for this war. They are going to overcome this crisis by seizing the oil in the Middle East. As you know, Iraq is the second largest oil country in the world."

He agreed that the invasion was part of America's global strategy. "The Afghanistan invasion was also another step. Under this strategy they are going to bring the whole world under their hegemony. They know the importance of Trincomalee harbour [in eastern Sri Lanka]. I read an article about the US military and how they are keen to use this harbour.

"We can't overcome these imperialist wars by supporting another imperialist power or governments like Sri Lanka's," he added. He was sympathetic to socialism, felt that the working class had to have its own organisation and listened as SEP members explained the party's orientation.

Bandara, a law student from Anuradhpura, declared that the actions of the US under Bush, including the invasion of Iraq, had threatened international law, international civilisation and the independence of countries. "Even though Ariel Sharon is a war criminal in suppressing the Palestinian people, the US supports him."

He said that the Democratic Party had acted differently in the past, but under the Clinton administration the US had attacked Iraq and continued with sanctions. "I really don't think any change of president from one party to the other would resolve these issues," he added.

Chamila, an arts student, declared: "Yes I agree that the US presidential elections are like an international election. However, I think socialist revolution must first be carried out in America. The reason is that it should be stopped from creating such devastation as the world's superpower. It uses technological and economic power against other countries."

A final year student had many questions about the Iraq war. He opposed the invasion of Iraq but thought that the US intervention in Afghanistan had been correct, because it had international backing. Likewise, he felt that Kerry would be a better alternative to Bush, because the Democrat contender criticised Bush for not harnessing international support. He was surprised when SEP members explained that Kerry had no intention of pulling US troops out of Iraq and criticised the role of France and Germany. "Up to now I thought Kerry was against war," he said.

Last Sunday, SEP members campaigned in the Ratmalana, Kotelawalapura area, on the outskirts of

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Colombo. Around 750 houses were built for railway workers in this location about 50 years ago. While the workers have maintained the properties, much of the area has been neglected for years. Water drainage canals are clogged with dirty water and numerous potholes provide breeding grounds for dengue mosquitoes.

Many workers complained bitterly about Sri Lanka's United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) coalition government, which includes the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). While members of the coalition had promised to halt railway privatisation if elected, the government's attacks on jobs and conditions were continuing.

Nimal, a member of the JVP-affiliated railway union, referred to the prolonged struggle of Bata shoe workers to defend their jobs. "After coming into power they abandoned the Bata workers' struggle and now hundreds of employees are without jobs. I am really disgusted with these shameful politics," he said.

Nimal and several other railway workers purchased copies of *The US war against Iraq and the 2004 US Presidential election*, containing the Sinhalese translation of a recent lecture by the US SEP national secretary David North and the US SEP election platform.

Piyadasa, also a railway worker, asked SEP members about the connection between the US elections and the questions facing Sri Lankan workers. He was also keen to discuss the Bush administration's military occupation of Iraq and Democratic candidate John Kerry's commitment to continue it.

One woman told SEP members: "Even a small kid knows about the atrocities being carried out in Iraq today. But the question is how to stop these things." She listened attentively to the explanation on the necessity for the development of an international socialist party of the working class.

The SEP urges students, workers and their families to attend the public meetings in Colombo and Kandy to be addressed by US presidential candidate Bill Van Auken and participate in a serious discussion on the key political and historical issues posed by the Iraq war and the US elections.

Colombo:
New Town Hall, Green Path, Colombo
Date: October 23, 2004
Time: 3 p.m.

Kandy:
Kannangara Hall, Peradeniya University Campus
Date: October 25, 2004
Time: 4 p.m.

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