

SEP campaigns for Sri Lankan meetings of US presidential candidate

Panini Wijesiriwardane
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka is conducting a vigorous campaign to build two important public meetings that are to be addressed by Bill Van Auken, the 2004 presidential candidate for the SEP's sister party in the United States. The first meeting is to be held at the New Town Hall in Colombo on October 23. The second will be at Peradeniya University near Kandy on October 25.

Over the past week, SEP members have distributed thousands of leaflets advertising the meetings in a number of areas in Colombo and surrounding suburbs. Hundreds of copies have been sold of a pamphlet containing Sinhala translations of the US SEP's election manifesto and a lecture entitled "The war in Iraq and the 2004 US presidential election" delivered by the US SEP national secretary David North in Sydney and Wellington last month.

The media in Sri Lanka has provided virtually no coverage of the US presidential election or the ongoing crimes of the Bush administration in Iraq. The few critical articles all accept Washington's bogus "war against terrorism" as legitimate. Intent on maintaining close relations with the US, the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and the opposition United National Front (UNF) both back the occupation of Iraq.

Prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a party based on a mixture of Sinhala communalism and populist rhetoric—held several protests to denounce the actions of US imperialism. Now part of the UPFA government, the JVP and its ministers are silent on the US occupation, the torture of detainees and the daily US attacks on rebel strongholds in Iraq.

By contrast, SEP members campaigning for the meetings found widespread hostility among ordinary working people to the Iraq war. No one supported the

occupation and many explicitly opposed the US actions in Iraq. There was a keen interest in the US presidential elections and a readiness to discuss the political implications of the transformation of Iraq into a virtual American colony.

Theja, a translator, said she opposed the Iraq war from the beginning but found no way of expressing her opposition. "In other countries, not like in Sri Lanka, there were many demonstrations against the Iraq invasion. I followed international news and got to know about these international issues and the opposition to the war. All the local media and political parties kept silence on this important issue. The majority [of people] could not follow the news in English."

Theja was also very concerned about the danger of a return to civil war in Sri Lanka. She spoke of her husband's recent visit to the eastern province, where there has been growing violence despite the ceasefire. "There the people want peace. But they worry about nothing coming to establish peace and also the escalating violence," she said.

Alutwatte, a young IT professional, branded the war on Iraq as a crime. "On the one hand America, the most powerful country on the earth, is fighting with modern and sophisticated weapons. On the other hand Iraqi masses, people from one of the most oppressed countries, are fighting with primitive weapons."

SEP members spoke to a group of supporters in Maththegoda. Jananandana, who works in the parliament, said the UPFA was just the same as the UNF. "The JVP shouted a great deal against American imperialism. Now they have shut their mouth," he declared. He thought that China had taken a stand against the US policy of "pre-emptive war" and was taken aback when China's record of supporting the UN resolutions legitimising the occupation was explained.

Kulasekara, a retired English teacher from Maththegoda, wanted to know what the SEP thought about the Democratic candidate, John Kerry. “If Kerry is elected, I think, the course will change. According to opinion polls, he is now leading,” he said. In recent weeks, the Sri Lankan press has published several articles promoting Kerry as an opponent of Bush’s policies. Kulasekara listened with interest as SEP members explained Kerry’s record of support for the war and his insistence that US troops have to stay in Iraq.

An insurance company worker opposed the US occupation of Iraq and blamed it for the rise in oil prices. “It is terrible. How can we afford this rising cost of living?” she said. She worked at the National Insurance Corporation which was government-owned until being privatised several years ago with the loss of jobs and working conditions.

A Muslim housewife drawing on her experience of Sri Lanka’s civil war said: “I can imagine the situation in Iraq. We had a war and faced many difficulties. War makes everything difficult for us. If there is a war there is no freedom. Iraqi people want freedom.”

Bernard, who owns a small tailor shop, was concerned about the impact of the US activities on the Indian sub-continent. He, like many people, pointed to the deteriorating living conditions in Sri Lanka. “The cost of living is rocketing and our business is rapidly deteriorating. The market is rapidly changing and we cannot do our work properly.”

Others were stunned by the graphs in David North’s lecture showing the extent of social inequality in the United States. As one said: “The charts in your pamphlet are shocking and as you say there are two Americas. I know Bush and Kerry represent the rich America and your sister party represents the other America—the poor America.”

The SEP encourages all those seeking a progressive and genuine alternative to capitalism and war to attend the meetings in Colombo and Kandy, where Bill Van Auken will speak on the key political and historical issues posed by the Iraq war.

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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