

SEP May Day meeting in Colombo

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a successful May Day meeting at New Town Hall in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo on the evening of May 1.

More than 200 workers, young people and professionals from Colombo, as well as Ambalangoda and Matara in the southern province, Kandy in central Sri Lanka and Chilaw in the northwestern province participated in

the meeting. Groups of plantation workers from Hatton and Bandarawela from the central hill districts travelled for hours to take part. A sizable number of young people were attending their first SEP public meeting and followed the speeches very closely.

K. Ratnayake, a member of the SEP Political Committee and the WSWS international editorial board, chaired the meeting and introduced its theme: international socialism against imperialist aggression. After extending revolutionary greetings to the SEP's sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, he called for one minute's silence to pay tribute to longtime SEP member Velupillai Saravanaperumal who died on April 14.

"Holding May Day is not an annual ritual for us. Today we are living in a period when fighting for the principles associated with international workers' day—the unity of the working class against imperialism and the struggle for world socialism—is crucial. At other May Day meetings being held in this country, no mention will be made of these principles, as the speakers are utterly hostile to them," Ratnayake explained.

He cited a May Day statement issued by 50 organisations, including the opportunist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which did not refer to internationalism or socialism. Their central slogan "Build the country" was nationalist to the core and an open adaptation to Sinhala chauvinist parties like the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Ratnayake stated: "World capitalism has twice plunged mankind into devastating world wars during the last century. That was how the bourgeoisie tried to resolve the crisis of their system by redividing the world among themselves... Today in this new century, world imperialism has no future for the international working class other than deepening social misery and bloody new wars."

Half the world's population continued to live in poverty despite revolutionary advances in science and technology. "In India, 35 percent of the population lives below official poverty line of one US dollar a day. A Sri Lankan Central Bank report, published two days ago, stated that the annual per capita income of the country has reached \$1,000. But it admitted that for the rural poor and plantation workers the figure was just \$400-500. The capitalist system cannot address the basic needs of the vast majority of the people."

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah, speaking in Tamil, said: "US imperialism launched an aggressive war against Iraq claiming that there were 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq and that it aimed to establish democracy by overthrowing the dictatorial regime. Two years later, the US claims have been exposed as damn lies." He went on to outline how US militarism had greatly intensified tensions with its rivals, particularly in Europe, and throughout the world, including on the Indian subcontinent.

Vilani Peiris, also a SEP Political Committee member, explained how US actions were destabilising the South Asian region. Washington was establishing closer ties with countries in the region, particularly India, but at the same time its militarist drive for global hegemony was generating fears and frictions within the ruling elites. She pointed to the recent US attempt to block Indian and Pakistani plans for a gas pipeline from Iran and noted New Delhi's efforts to forge relations with other countries, including longtime rival China.

Peiris pointed out that Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf faced a deepening political crisis following his decision to actively support the Bush administration's "war on terrorism". He had responded by unleashing repressive measures against the political opposition. As for glowing media reports of "high economic growth" in Pakistan, she explained, no economic benefits had reached the vast majority of working people, who continued to confront high levels of poverty and unemployment.

Wije Dias, SEP general secretary and WSWS international editorial board member, delivered the main address to the meeting. He drew attention to the war clouds gathering around the world and insisted that working people

throughout the globe had to prepare politically to stop a barbaric third world war.

“The opposition to US aggression must be indivisibly joined with a program to overthrow the imperialist world order as a whole and its national bourgeois collaborators in the colonial and semi-colonial countries,” he said. “This is underscored by the experiences of the anti-Iraq war protest movement that emerged in February 2003. It was an international movement that brought tens of millions internationally onto the streets opposing the war preparations against Iraq. But in less than two weeks, the US armies, joined by those of the so-called coalition of the willing, invaded Iraq and unleashed their fire power against the impoverished masses of a third world country.”

Dias outlined the evolution of US imperialism, which emerged at the end of nineteenth century. Even as it began to challenge for world hegemony against its older European rivals, the US was thwarted by the emergence of the Soviet Union, which resulted from the socialist revolution of October 1917 under the proletarian internationalist leadership of Lenin and Trotsky. The Red Army led by Trotsky subsequently defeated the joint efforts of the imperialist powers to topple the first workers’ state.

The US only emerged as the dominant power in the aftermath of World War II after world capitalism had been convulsed by three decades of economic strife, war and revolution. Relying on the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties to suppress the aspirations of working people in country after country, the US sought to restabilise capitalism by resurrecting war-devastated Europe and Japan. “In doing so, the US took on all the burdens of the moribund imperialist order. From then on the crisis of world capitalism was concentrated in the US and the White House, Republican or Democratic,” he said.

Dias traced the collapse of the post-war boom and economic framework to the end of the Bretton Woods agreement in 1971. The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed a series of mass movements, including in Britain, Portugal and Spain, and anti-colonial struggles such as in Vietnam, which were contained and pushed back. From the late 1970s, a counter-offensive led by Reagan and Thatcher led to the systematic erosion of the social position of the working class. In a bid to counter declining profits, corporations increasingly integrated production globally to exploit cheap sources of labour.

Dias explained that the collapse of the autarchic Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989-91 was simply the sharpest expression of more universal processes: the globalisation of production undermined all programs based on national economic regulation. Far from leading to a new golden age of world capitalism, the end of

the Cold War produced growing tensions between the major powers. The eruption of US militarism in the 1990s, and particularly under the Bush administration, was a desperate attempt to overcome the economic decline of US imperialism.

“The bourgeoisie in the backward countries is today caught between the inherent crisis of their rule emanating from their historical belatedness and the pressure of vast international changes. Sri Lanka is a classic example. In order to advance their own interests, the major powers, including the US, insist that a way must be found to end the country’s 20-year civil war through a deal with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). But the parties of the ruling elite have been so entrenched in Sinhala chauvinism over decades that they fear that any compromise with the LTTE will alienate their social base.”

Dias explained that, just one year after undemocratically dismissing the previous United National Front government, President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s ruling coalition was in deep turmoil. Government attempts to restart peace talks were stalled as the second largest coalition partner, the JVP, was whipping up chauvinist sentiment against any concessions to the LTTE.

He cited a particularly provocative article in the March issue of the JVP official organ *Niyamuwa*, accusing the LTTE of infiltrating the tea plantation areas to recruit Tamil youth. These young people were the descendants of workers brought from India by the British colonial rulers more than one and a half centuries ago. Yet the JVP and its allies among the Buddhist fundamentalists were seeking to stir up communal divisions by branding the plantation youth as outsiders from India.

Dias concluded by emphasising the necessity for workers and youth to oppose all forms of nationalism and chauvinism and to join the struggle to build a party based on socialist internationalism. He urged those in the audience to study the ongoing daily analysis of world events on the *World Socialist Web Site* and to actively participate in its work.

The formal meeting concluded with a generous collection of 7,400 rupees to the SEP fund and the singing of the Internationale. Many people stayed behind to look over the literature on sale and to talk to SEP members. In all, literature worth over 3,000 rupees was sold.



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