

Socialist Equality Party stands in Sri Lankan presidential election

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) announces that its general secretary Wije Dias will stand as its candidate in the upcoming Sri Lankan presidential election.

Dias will run on a socialist program to defend the interests of working people and to oppose war, attacks on democratic rights and the destruction of living standards. The SEP will campaign as broadly as possible among workers and young people as well as the urban and rural poor to promote a discussion and debate on the policies needed to combat the social and economic disaster they confront.

The SEP is standing not simply to address voters in Sri Lanka but to raise before workers throughout the Asian region and internationally the necessity of adopting a socialist perspective and program. The problems confronting Sri Lankan workers, like those facing their class brothers and sisters across the Indian subcontinent, stem from the predatory activities of global capital and cannot be resolved within the confines of this small island or any single nation state.

At the centre of the SEP's perspective is the struggle for internationalism. The natural allies of the working class in Sri Lanka are to be found not in the corridors of power in Colombo but among workers around the world who confront the same ruthless forms of exploitation and often the same corporate exploiters. To fight for its interests, the working class requires a global strategy: to reorganise the vast productive forces of the international economy along socialist lines to meet the needs of the majority of humanity, not the profits of a few.

Such a struggle requires the rejection of all forms of racism, communalism and caste discrimination which have been whipped up for decades across the Indian subcontinent to set worker against worker and to buttress the privileges and power of rival ruling elites. The poison of racialism has played a pernicious role in Sri Lanka, where it has produced pogrom after pogrom and a disastrous civil war that has cost the lives of more than 60,000 people, devastated large areas of the island and left countless thousands maimed or homeless.

All factions of the ruling class have proven utterly incapable of ending this fratricidal war. More than three years after the United National Party (UNP)-led government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed a ceasefire, peace talks have stalled and the shaky truce is on the brink of collapse. Last month's assassination of Foreign Minister Lashmir Kadirgamar—whoever was responsible—has produced an intensified clamour for war in Colombo and a spate of provocations by the Sri Lankan military in the war zones of the North and East.

In these conditions, two camps of the ruling elite are vying for control of the presidency and its sweeping executive powers. The UNP, which now thrusts itself forward as the proponent of peace, was

responsible for starting the war and prosecuting it for over a decade. Its presidential candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe began negotiations with the LTTE in 2002, not out of concern for the war's impact on ordinary people, but because the conflict had become a barrier to the plans of the corporate elite to transform the island into a regional investment gateway—"the Hong Kong of South Asia".

His rival, Mahinda Rajapakse, the candidate of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is garnering support from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which are hostile to the current ceasefire and to any talks with the LTTE. These parties most openly enunciate the foul ideology of Sinhala supremacism, on which the UNP and particularly the SLFP have rested for more than half a century. The logic of their demands to strengthen the military and renegotiate the ceasefire is to plunge the island back to war.

So bitter are the divisions in ruling circles that the country's Supreme Court was compelled to adjudicate on the date for the election. Behind the scenes, factions of the military and state apparatus are conniving with Sinhala chauvinist outfits to stir up fears and communal tensions. They may well have engineered the killing of Kadirgamar for precisely that purpose. A stable parliamentary government is virtually impossible because the social base of all the major parties has been severely eroded. Given the level of acrimony in ruling circles, it is by no means certain that the poll will go ahead, or, if it does, that the winner will be able to assume office.

The SEP calls for the rejection of all these parties, which have totally failed the majority of the population. Working people cannot bear the burden of further war, nor can they afford the "peace" that is being prepared with the backing of the imperialist powers. What is being concocted by the parties to the so-called peace process, including the LTTE, is a communal powersharing arrangement that will trample on democratic rights and open the way for a sweeping program of market reforms to intensify the exploitation of the working class.

For Washington, which ignored the war for years, the island's conflict is a destabilising factor that threatens its geopolitical interests in South Asia, particularly in southern India, where US corporations have invested heavily in the burgeoning IT industry. The reckless US military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq make clear that the Bush administration would not hesitate to thrust Sri Lanka back into the maelstrom of war if its objectives were not being achieved through the "peace process".

The working class in Sri Lanka and throughout South Asia cannot allow its fate to be a plaything in the hands of the imperialist powers. The purpose of the SEP's campaign is to provide the means to

organise a powerful counteroffensive against the machinations of the major powers and to fight for the common interests of working people throughout the region and internationally.

The most explosive factor in world politics is the eruption of US militarism and its drive for global economic and strategic dominance. All our political opponents, including the JVP and the LTTE, have endorsed the Bush administration's "war on terrorism" and its subjugation of the Iraqi and Afghan people. The SEP and its candidate will campaign centrally for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and the prosecution of those responsible for Washington's war crimes.

To put an end to the war in Sri Lanka, the SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all security forces from the north and east of the island. The forcible maintenance of the unitary state has resulted not only in entrenched discrimination against the Tamil minority but in the domination of militarism and attacks on basic democratic rights throughout the island.

The working class must oppose every form of oppression and champion the rights of all, regardless of their ethnicity, language or religion. Any resolution to the 20-year civil war requires the repudiation of the Sri Lankan constitution, which entrenches communalism and the autocratic executive presidency. The SEP advocates the establishment of a genuinely representative Constituent Assembly to enable ordinary working people, rather than cliques of capitalist politicians, to decide on all outstanding issues of democratic rights.

The defence of democratic rights is bound up with the struggle for social equality. All the capitalist parties, including the JVP and LTTE, peddle the myth that the economic prescriptions of the IMF and World Bank and the unfettered operation of market forces will end the country's economic and social crisis. Far from improving living standards, this agenda has produced a deepening chasm between rich and poor, the destruction of social services and the further deterioration of basic infrastructure.

The incapacity of the profit system to address the elementary needs of working people has been graphically exposed by the impact of the Asian tsunami on December 26 and again by the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in the US. The activities of the "free market" left millions of people at the mercy of the forces of nature. In both cases, the response of capitalist politicians from US President Bush to Sri Lankan President Kumaratunga reek of indifference and contempt toward the immense suffering inflicted. Eight months after the tsunami killed more than 300,000 people and devastated the coasts of the Bay of Bengal, reconstruction has barely begun and countless thousands are living in appalling conditions without access to basic services.

In southern Asia as in the south of the United States, the victims were overwhelmingly the poor. Their lives were uprooted and destroyed, not because the technology does not exist to prevent such large-scale disasters, but because the resources of society are monopolised by the wealthy few for private profit. Huge advances have been made in science and technology that could put an end to the social evils of hunger, disease and want. The SEP insists that the vast wealth created by the working class has to be directed to meeting the pressing social needs of the majority, not to boosting corporate profits. The struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society will necessitate deep inroads into the present bastions of private wealth and privilege, including the nationalisation of major industries and banks under the

democratic control of working people.

The SEP fights for the establishment of the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for socialism. Working people are still living with the terrible consequences of the reactionary post-World War II settlement between the former British colonial rulers and the local capitalist elites that led to the communal carve-up of the Indian subcontinent and the creation of the artificial statelet of Sri Lanka. The SEP advances the slogan of the United Socialist States of South Asia as the means of unifying and mobilising workers and the oppressed throughout the region as part of the global struggle to abolish capitalism.

The essential prerequisite for an offensive against the profit system is the political independence of the working class. By unifying its struggles, defending the democratic rights of all and advancing its own socialist solution to end poverty and want, the working class can become a pole of attraction for the oppressed masses of the urban and rural poor and initiate a powerful movement to conquer political power and form a workers' and farmers' government.

Workers require a new mass party to fight for their interests. The old organisations of the Sri Lankan working class—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party (CP) and the trade unions—have proven to be worthless for the defence of even the most basic rights of workers. The LSSP and CP function as nothing more than the political auxiliaries of the bourgeois SLFP.

The SEP is the only party that has consistently defended the historic interests of the working class. Its candidate Wije Dias has an unblemished record of more than four decades of intransigent struggle for the principles of socialist internationalism. He is a founding member of the SEP's forerunner—the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—formed in 1968 to combat the historic betrayal of Trotskyism by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) when it joined the bourgeois government of Mme Sirima Bandaranaike. The repeated warnings made at the time by the RCL of the dangers of communalism have been tragically vindicated in the brutal civil war that erupted in 1983. Dias became general secretary of the RCL after the untimely death of the party's former leader Keerthi Balasuriya in 1987.

In the coming period the SEP will publish an election manifesto, setting out our program and policies. We call on all readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*—in Sri Lanka, Asia and internationally—to actively support and participate in our campaign. Help distribute our manifesto, which will be published in English, Sinhala and Tamil, make plans to attend our public meetings, organise meetings at your workplace or local area for SEP speakers to address, contribute to our election fund and, above all, seriously study our program and perspective and apply to join the SEP.



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