

SEP press conference

Sri Lankan presidential candidate condemns Bush's treatment of hurricane victims

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a media conference on Tuesday at the Hotel Nippon in central Colombo to announce its candidate, Wije Dias, for the presidential election on November 17.

In the past, the Sri Lankan media has studiously ignored the SEP's election campaigns. This press conference, however, was attended by 12 journalists from a range of organisations, covering all three languages—Sinhala, Tamil and English. The newspapers *Sudar Oli*, *Divaina*, *Lakbima*, *Lanka Deepa*, *Akuna*, *Thinakkural*, *Virakesari* and *Lanka Left* were represented, as well as television channels Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, Sirasa, Shakthi and MTV.

SEP Central Committee member Vilani Peiris chaired the media conference and introduced the candidate. She explained that Dias had been involved in the struggle for socialist internationalism under the banner of the International Committee of the Fourth International for nearly 40 years. He was elected to the Central Committee of the SEP's forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), at its founding conference in 1968 and became the party's general secretary after the death of its founding secretary Keerthi Balasuriya in 1987.

Wije Dias told the media: "I am a member of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS and a journalist. Our campaign is not narrowly aimed at gathering votes in Sri Lanka but is also addressed to the working class beyond this island.

"We want to encourage the broadest possible discussion and debate on the program and perspectives that can genuinely offer solutions to the pressing problems facing the masses in this country, South Asia and throughout the world. We insist that such a perspective has to be internationalist and socialist."

Dias explained that world capitalism was in deep

economic crisis, which was driving US imperialism to use its military might to bring key strategic and economic areas of the globe under its control. "This is glaringly evident in the aggressive colonialist policy the US has already carried out in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq and its threats against Iran, North Korea and other countries branded as 'evil'.

"Do the American working people derive any benefit from this predatory neo-colonial policy of the Bush administration in Washington?" Dias asked. "One only has to open one's eyes to the callous way that the White House reacted to the terrible disaster faced by the poor in the southern states of America when Hurricane Katrina struck to find the answer.

"The response of the US political establishment stood in complete contrast to the spontaneous reaction of the ordinary American people who rose to the occasion and to the best of their ability helped the victims. The nationalists here in Sri Lanka identify American working people with the politicians in Washington, both Democratic and Republican, who represent the corporate oligarchy. This is not a mistake or due to political illiteracy but is a conscious attempt to keep class brothers and sisters here and in the US divided from each other.

"The neglect and lack of concern shown by the Bush administration toward the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina is an illustration of the character of the world capitalist system as a whole. When 95,000 square kilometres in Louisiana, Missouri and Mississippi—an area equal to the land mass of Britain—was laid waste, no immediate relief measures were forthcoming to evacuate and settle the victims, not to speak of the lack of necessary preparations before the event. Federal government relief was delayed for days as millions were displaced and over a thousand died. Those who suffered

most were poor working people.

“It is just like the reaction of the governments of South Asia when the tsunami devastated the lives of millions of people here. The government of the world’s richest nation, which has at its disposal the most advanced science and technical resources, is only interested in exploiting the New Orleans tragedy to strengthen its state machine and to open up new opportunities for big businesses to grab profits.

“This is an indictment of the entire capitalist system. Its rottenness is laid bare by these events. What this poses for the working class internationally is the need to take the initiative and to mobilise independently to reorganise the world’s vast resources under a socialist system—that is for social need, not profit.”

Dias explained that nine months after the tsunami hit South Asia, displacing over half a million people, many of the victims were still without proper shelter or stable means of living. He pointed out that the living standards of broad layers of working people were continuing to deteriorate and warned that the ruling elites were preparing to use anti-democratic measures to deal with any resistance and opposition.

Dias said the past two decades in Sri Lanka demonstrated the inability of any of the parties to end the civil war, defend basic democratic rights or improve social conditions.

The United National Party launched the civil war against the Tamils to divide and disorient the people as it implemented open market policies. The Peoples Alliance (PA) formed by Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1994 with the old left parties then intensified the war since 1995 under the banner “war for peace”.

“The present PA candidate Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse has entered agreements with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) which both treat any concession to Tamils as a betrayal of the ‘Sinhala motherland’. The logic of this coalition leads inexorably back to civil war,” Dias stated.

“The UNP’s presidential candidate and opposition leader, Ranil Wickremesinghe, is a tested stooge of international finance capital. He is once again promising to bring prosperity by implementing his IMF-backed program of ‘Regaining Sri Lanka,’ which was rejected at the election last year.”

Dias explained that both these candidates were making empty promises for the sole purpose of hoodwinking voters and preparing for the next round of the agenda demanded by the international banks. Their programs

could not offer solutions to the burning social issues of employment, decent wages and welfare measures to support the weak. They would only drag the country back to war and attack the democratic rights of the masses.

“The working people must not and cannot entrust the task of solving the problems they face to the representatives of the very social and economic system that has created the problems in the first place,” Dias said.

“The SEP campaigns to unify the workers of all communities for the establishment of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a broader perspective of a socialist republic of South Asia. All the unresolved democratic tasks will find solutions within such a program,” Dias said in concluding his introductory remarks.

Journalists asked a number of questions. In answering how the SEP proposed to end the war, Dias pointed out that the so-called peace process begun by the UNP had proven to be a failure. The reason, he explained, was that the ruling class was incapable of addressing any of the basic democratic demands of the Tamil people. Instead they were seeking a power sharing deal with the Tamil bourgeoisie through the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

“The first condition for a peace settlement is to withdraw the Sri Lankan military from the north and east and to return the land in the High Security Zones to their legitimate owners. Then a new constitution must be drafted to abrogate all discriminatory and oppressive laws and assure equal democratic rights to all communities. The SEP calls for the establishment of a genuine constitutional assembly to undertake this task,” Dias said.

Asked about the SEP’s campaign, Dias said the party would reach out to working people internationally through the *World Socialist Web Site*. He said that the SEP has planned to hold public meetings throughout the island, from far north to the deep south, and also in India. He explained that articles and comments published on the WSWS would be translated into Tamil and Sinhala and distributed as widely as possible at work places and in neighborhoods.



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