

# Support the Socialist Equality Party in the 2005 Sri Lankan presidential election

## The socialist alternative to war and social inequality

**The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)**  
**22 October 2005**

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers, young people, intellectuals and housewives to support and participate in our campaign for the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka.

Our candidate Wije Dias is the only one advocating a socialist alternative to war and social inequality. Dias, 64, is the SEP general secretary and a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board. He has dedicated his entire adult life to the emancipation of the working class through the principled struggle for socialism.

The cornerstone of the SEP's campaign is internationalism. The SEP is standing not simply to win votes in Sri Lanka but to initiate a discussion throughout the Indian subcontinent on the necessity for workers to adopt a socialist program and perspective. To combat the predatory activities of global capital, the working class needs its own international strategy: the reorganisation of the world economy along socialist lines to meet the social needs of the majority, not the profits of a few.

None of the problems confronting workers can be resolved within the borders of one small island, or any single nation state. Nor can working people put any faith in the parties of the ruling class. Time and again over the past half-century, governments of all political complexions in Sri Lanka and throughout the subcontinent have proven incapable of addressing the most basic needs and aspirations of the masses.

The official responses to the December 26 tsunami, and, more recently, the huge earthquake in northern Pakistan and India, have exposed the universal indifference in ruling circles to the plight of the region's poor. Ten months after waves swept away entire towns killing more than 300,000 people in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand, many of the survivors are still living a hand-to-mouth existence in squalid temporary accommodation. Most of the \$4 billion in international aid that was pledged at the Jakarta summit in January has not reached the victims.

Likewise, unpredictable geological forces produced the massive tremor on October 8, but the terrible social consequences—more than 40,000 people dead and up to 2.5 million homeless—are above all the product of an economic order that puts profit before all else. The lack of properly-constructed housing, roads and infrastructure is the inevitable outcome of the systematic plundering of cheap labour and resources in the oppressed countries of Asia, Africa and elsewhere to provide superprofits for the tiny wealthy elites in the major imperialist centres.

The main preoccupation in Washington, London, Tokyo and Berlin is not with the victims of the quake or tsunami, but with the impact on financial markets and the dangers of political instability. The promises of aid are aimed at propping up local regimes and furthering their economic and strategic interests in the region. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described the tsunami as “a wonderful opportunity” to show “the heart of the American people” that “has paid great dividends for us”.

The “heart” of the Bush administration was also on display when

Hurricane Katrina swept over the southern US, revealing the same contempt for the working people of New Orleans as for the impoverished masses of South Asia. The disaster stripped the façade from American capitalism and exposed the underlying social rot produced by decades of the unfettered operation of the market—a deep chasm between rich and poor, decaying infrastructure and a lack of basic services. Whether in New Orleans, Colombo or New Delhi, workers share a common interest in replacing the present bankrupt social order with one that meets their needs and aspirations.

The essential precondition for a unified struggle of working people throughout the subcontinent is the rejection of all forms of racism, communalism and nationalism, which the ruling classes foment to set worker against worker, between and within countries, to maintain their privileged position. Nowhere has the poison of racialism played a more pernicious role than in Sri Lanka, where it has produced 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.

The presidential candidates of the two main bourgeois parties—Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party (UNP)—claim to favour “peace”. Neither of them, however, offers a progressive solution to the conflict. The differences between the two, while tactical, are nevertheless bitter.

Rajapakse is backed by layers of the state bureaucracy, military, Buddhist hierarchy and business whose interests are bound up with the maintenance of Sinhala supremacy and opposed to any concessions to the LTTE or the country's Tamil minority. He has allied himself with the Sinhala extremists of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), who are demanding the strengthening of the military, a revision of the current ceasefire and the abandonment of the P-TOMS agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the joint administration of tsunami aid. The logic of these policies is to set the course for war.

Wickremesinghe, on the other hand, declares he wants a renewal of the “peace process”. But his UNP was responsible for starting the war in 1983 and for ruthlessly prosecuting it for more than a decade. He most clearly represents layers of the corporate elite, backed by the major powers, who now regard the war as an obstacle to the integration of the island into the global processes of production. A negotiated deal with the LTTE would establish a power-sharing arrangement between Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites to launch a massive assault on the social position of the working class. Moreover, its anti-democratic and communal character would resolve none of the underlying issues, inevitably setting the stage for future conflict.

The inability of the ruling class to resolve its disputes or gain popular

support for its agenda has produced one political crisis after another. There have been four general elections over the past five years but they have solved nothing, producing an ever-deepening political paralysis. Increasingly, the ruling elites are drawing the conclusion that they must turn to autocratic forms of rule.

The election itself is being held under a state of emergency imposed by the government following the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in August. Colombo's entire political and media establishment immediately came together to blame the LTTE. Yet, more than two months after the murder, no conclusive evidence has been publicly released. Whoever committed the crime, the chief political beneficiaries have been the JVP and JHU, which have intensified their clamour for war, and the military hierarchy, which is deeply hostile to the current ceasefire. The army has exploited the emergency powers to conduct provocative sweeps and a security crackdown against Tamils, compounding the atmosphere of tension and fear.

Thirteen candidates are standing in the presidential elections, but there are only two real choices. On the one hand, there is the camp of the ruling class and its feuding cliques led by Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe, who, despite their bagfuls of false promises, have no solution to any of the problems facing working people. On the other hand, the SEP is standing to clarify the need for the working class to build a new political movement, independent of all the ruling elites, to fight for a socialist future—an end to the war and the establishment of genuine social equality. All the other candidates directly or indirectly line up behind Rajapakse or Wickremesinghe.

### **The eruption of US militarism**

The deepening economic, social and political crisis in Sri Lanka is neither a temporary nor a localised phenomenon. Rather, it is the product of the irresolvable contradictions wracking the profit system itself, above all between the increasingly globalised character of productive processes and the bankrupt nation state system in which capitalism remains rooted. The most destabilising factor in world politics today is the reckless attempt by US imperialism to overcome this fundamental contradiction by establishing its dominance over its rivals in every corner of the globe.

Under the bogus banner of the “war on terrorism,” the Bush administration has subjugated Afghanistan and Iraq to neo-colonial forms of rule. Washington's aim was never to bring peace and democracy to these two countries but to use them to advance its ambition to dominate the oil- and gas- rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. And the US is no less determined to stamp its influence over the Indian subcontinent. Since 2001, the Bush administration has pushed for the renewal of the “peace process” in Sri Lanka, promoted peace talks between India and Pakistan, and sought a negotiated settlement to the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Washington's support for “peace” in South Asia does not contradict its aggressive militarism in other parts of the globe—the two tactics are simply different sides of the same coin. The conflict in Sri Lanka and rivalry between India and Pakistan threaten burgeoning US economic and strategic interests in the region. Like China, India has become a major destination for global investment. Access to the apparently limitless pool of cheap, educated labour there has become an essential lifeline for rival transnational corporations facing declining rates of profit. Annual foreign direct investment in India has jumped from just \$US129 million in 1991-92 to an estimated \$5 billion this year.

India is a key element in US strategic plans. It is a potential ally against China and a useful stepping stone to the Middle East and Central Asia. Far

from bringing peace, Washington's intrigues in South Asia are only setting the stage for new and more devastating conflicts in the future. As for Sri Lanka, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are a clear warning that the White House will not hesitate to thrust the small island back into the maelstrom of war if US objectives are not being achieved through the “peace process”.

The Bush administration's machinations have proceeded unopposed by the subcontinent's ruling elites, who have uniformly abandoned their previous anti-imperialist rhetoric. The end of the Cold War eliminated their ability to manoeuvre between Washington and Moscow and to posture as “non-aligned”, “independent” or even “socialist”. In response to Bush's diktat “you are either with us or against us,” all the regional leaders and parties slavishly accepted the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and sought to exploit the “war on terrorism” for their own purposes.

On the one hand, the proponents of the “peace process” in Sri Lanka saw an opportunity to pressure the LTTE to the negotiating table on their terms. The defection of SLFP members to the UNP precipitated an election in 2001 and the new Wickremesinghe government signed a ceasefire deal and began peace talks with the LTTE in 2002. On the other hand, those seeking to crush the LTTE militarily have also sought to enlist US imperialism in their “war on terrorism”. The JVP leaders, who in the past issued fiery but empty anti-imperialist denunciations, are now regular guests at the US embassy in Colombo to exchange views with visiting dignitaries.

The struggle for socialism across the Indian subcontinent involves opposition to all forms of imperialist aggression and neo-colonial oppression. Unlike the cowardly political representatives of the bourgeoisie, the SEP unequivocally demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and the release of all prisoners of war held in Guantanamo Bay, Diego Garcia and other US prisons around the world. All those responsible for planning and organising the war must be fully exposed, tried and punished as war criminals. We seek to develop a global counteroffensive against imperialism by workers in South Asia, side by side with their class brothers and sisters in America, Europe and the rest of the world.

### **A balance sheet of postwar “independence”**

It is time for the working class in South Asia to draw a balance sheet of the experiences of the past half-century. The entire protracted experiment with the postwar “independence” settlements has proven to be a complete disaster. Nowhere on the subcontinent has the capitalist class been able to meet the democratic aspirations and social needs of the working masses. Hundreds of millions of people are compelled to live their lives in destitution without the amenities of clean water and electricity, let alone proper health care, education and other social services. In answer to these urgent needs, governments offer more of the same—the uninhibited operation of the market, which is widening, not lessening, the social divide between rich and poor.

Incapable of resolving the immense social crisis, the ruling classes have continued British colonialism's policy of “divide and rule,” repeatedly whipping up communal, caste and ethnic divisions to set working people against each other with catastrophic consequences. The region's artificial national borders are the direct product of the collusion of the bourgeois leaders of the Indian National Congress with the British colonial rulers to abort the mass anti-colonial movement. The arbitrary partition of the subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and largely Hindu India led immediately to a war for control of Kashmir and communal violence that claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and set the stage for future

pogroms and wars.

The transformation of British Ceylon into the nation state of Sri Lanka was not conceived in Colombo but in the Colonial Office in London. Confronted with revolutionary convulsions across the region, the colonial rulers calculated that the strategically-placed island would provide a secure base to safeguard British interests in South Asia. D.S. Senanayake and other “founding fathers” of Sri Lanka were hostile to the anti-colonial movement—which was led by the Trotskyists of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI)—and had “independence” thrust upon them. The terms of the arrangement included the maintenance of British military bases on the island.

In a far-sighted analysis, the BLPI leaders explained that the newly-created states in South Asia did not constitute genuine independence but simply “a refashioning” of the imperialist order. In 1948, they prophetically warned of the dangers of communal war and called on Indian and Pakistani workers to reject “reactionary expansionists on either side of the boundary” and fight for the “voluntary re-union of the sub-continent,” which they insisted was “not possible except through the social revolution both in the Indian Union and Pakistan”.

In Ceylon, while the “founding fathers” dutifully attended the 1948 handover pageants staged by Britain, the BLPI held a rally of 50,000 workers on Galle Face Green to demonstrate their opposition to the phony independence. From the outset, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie resorted to Sinhala Buddhist supremacism to create an ideological basis for their precarious rule. One of the first actions of the inaugural UNP government was to abolish the citizenship rights of one million Tamil-speaking plantation workers—more than one tenth of the island’s population.

The subsequent adaptation of the BLPI leaders to the postwar framework had tragic consequences for the South Asian working class. Founded on an all-India perspective to unify workers across the subcontinent, the BLPI was liquidated into the Congress Socialist Party in India, and entered into an unprincipled reunification with the opportunists of the reestablished Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). In the name of getting closer to the masses, the LSSP adapted to, rather than fought against, Sinhala chauvinism and eventually completely abandoned the principles of socialist internationalism, entering the SLFP-led government of Mme. Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. As ministers in a bourgeois government, the LSSP leaders were responsible for drawing up the 1972 constitution that enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhala as the official language.

The LSSP betrayal sowed the seeds of civil war. By abandoning the struggle to advance the interests of all sections of the Sri Lankan working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—on a unified basis, the LSSP opened the door for petty bourgeois radical organisations to win an audience for reactionary communal politics. In the south, the JVP appealed to rural Sinhala youth on the basis of Sinhala chauvinism, mixed with Maoism and Guevarism. In the north, the LTTE called on disaffected Tamil youth to fight for Tamil separatism—in the form of a separate statelet of Eelam—as the means to end state-sanctioned discrimination.

Successive Colombo governments have whipped up Sinhala chauvinism to maintain their grip on power. Prior to the civil war in 1983, the UNP launched a vicious islandwide anti-Tamil pogrom to deflect attention from the social disaster caused by its policies of structural reform. Parallel processes have taken place throughout the subcontinent. Islamic fundamentalism and Hindu supremacism, along with the politics of caste and ethnicity, have been deliberately fostered by the ruling elites in Pakistan and India to divide the working class and buttress their own privileged position.

To defend its own independent class interests, the working class must revive the internationalist traditions established by the BLPI. The SEP fights for the establishment of the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the United Socialist States of South Asia. This is the

means for unifying and mobilising workers and the oppressed throughout the region as part of the global struggle to abolish capitalism.

### **A socialist solution to civil war**

The Socialist Equality Party, along with its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), is the only party that has consistently opposed the civil war. We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan military forces from the North and East as the only way to lay the basis for a genuine and lasting peace. In advancing its program to end the war, the SEP is guided by one overriding principle: the necessity for the working class to establish its political independence from the bourgeois parties and the capitalist state.

It is an illusion to believe that peace can be achieved under the auspices of Wickremesinghe or Rajapakse. On the contrary, ordinary Sri Lankans, as long as they remain tied to the UNP and the SLFP, will face the ever-present threat of war. Only the working class can provide a lasting solution—by appealing to the downtrodden rural masses, by unifying Tamil, Sinhalese, Muslim and Christian in a common rejection of all forms of communalism, chauvinism and separatism and by developing, on this basis, a mass revolutionary movement for a workers’ and farmers’ government.

The SEP opposes the maintenance of the unitary state by force of arms. Such a policy not only attacks the democratic rights of the Tamil people, but leads inevitably to the domination of militarism and the undermining of democratic rights throughout the country.

At the same time, the SEP opposes the LTTE’s demand for a separate capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam. This demand articulates, not the interests of the Tamil masses, but those of the Tamil bourgeoisie, which, like its counterparts in other national movements such as the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the African National Congress and the Irish Republican Army, wants to establish its own relations with global capital for the exploitation of the working class. Were the LTTE to take control of the North and East, it would immediately begin appealing to global investors to establish mutually beneficial arrangements at the direct expense of Tamil workers.

Likewise, the SEP opposes the various powersharing schemes that have been proposed as part of a “peace” deal. These plans have two common features: communalism and contempt for democratic rights. They all involve the imposition of an unelected, communally-based interim administration in the North and East that will collaborate with Colombo in implementing the dictates of global capital. At the same time, the institutionalisation of divisions between the Muslim, Tamil and Sinhala communities will inevitably lay the basis for future tension and conflict.

To create the foundations for a genuine democratic settlement, the SEP advocates the convening of a Constituent Assembly charged with drawing up a constitution and settling all outstanding issues of democratic rights. The SEP’s proposal has nothing in common with the cynical exercises conducted for drawing up the 1972 and 1978 Constitutions, which Rajapakse wants to repeat after this election. A new constitution that genuinely expresses the interests of the majority must be drawn up by an assembly of representatives of ordinary working people, elected openly and democratically by and for them, not by cliques of capitalist politicians behind the backs of the masses.

The establishment of a genuine democracy is impossible without the separation of church and state. This means ending the status of Buddhism as a state religion and withdrawing all state subsidies to religious organisations. It requires the abrogation of all repressive and discriminatory laws, including the legal barriers that continue to deprive

plantation Tamils of their full rights, together with the ending of the Public Security Act, Emergency Regulations and the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

### **Deepening social inequality**

Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe are engaged in a cynical bidding war of empty election promises to try to dupe the voters. Both candidates know that the government's economic agenda is determined by the IMF and World Bank, not their campaign manifestos. As soon as the election is over, global capital will demand a new round of cutbacks to budget spending, including the slashing of fuel subsidies and further inroads into essential social services. The heaviest burden will inevitably fall on those who can least afford it.

The clearest demonstration of the political bankruptcy of the ruling class is its failure to address the disastrous impact of the December 26 tsunami, which killed nearly 40,000 in the island's coastal zones and directly affected at least 800,000 more. Some 80,000 houses, as well as schools, hospitals and other essential services, were destroyed by the massive waves, yet reconstruction has barely begun. According to official figures, 10 months after the calamity only 1,126 new homes have been completed and another 15,619 are in various stages of construction. Most of the victims, overwhelmingly the poor, are forced to live in makeshift refugee camps or rely on friends and relatives.

The plight of the tsunami victims is the most visible indication of the economic and social disaster created by more than two decades of free market policies under successive UNP- and SLFP-led governments. Billions of dollars have been squandered on a fratricidal war, while vital social and physical infrastructure, including elementary plans to combat natural catastrophes, has been neglected and run down. A series of statistics demonstrates the widening chasm between rich and poor:

\* According to the latest Central Bank *Consumer Finance Survey Report* for 2003/2004, the share of national income of the richest 20 percent of the population increased from 53 percent in 1996/97 to 55.1 in 2003/2004. The figure for the poorest 20 percent declined from 4 percent to 3.6 percent. The same report shows the poorest 10 percent received just 1.1 percent of national income, compared to 39.7 percent for the top decile.

\* Twenty six percent of people are struggling to survive below the poverty line of \$US1 a day. Nearly half of the population—45 percent—lives on less than \$US2 a day. According to the most recent World Bank policy review, the number of plantation workers living in poverty increased by 50 percent during the decade from 1991 to 2001. About 1.7 million families rely on the government's samurdhi [poverty alleviation] program, which provides a monthly handout of 500 rupees (\$US5) or less to each family.

\* The *Consumer Finance Survey Report* for 2003/2004 found that 15.4 percent of the country's 19 million population lives in huts made of wattle and daub, mud or cadjan [palm leaves] that can barely be classified as "housing". Only 31 percent of people have access to piped water. A quarter of the population has no electricity.

\* Two decades of war have taken a huge toll, particularly in the war zones of the North and East. An estimated 800,000 people have been displaced internally and 172,000 are still living in refugee camps, despite the ceasefire signed in 2002. About 30,000 women are war widows.

### **A socialist program for the working class**

The SEP advocates an economic system whose organising principle is satisfying the human needs of the population as a whole, not the creation of profit and the accumulation of vast personal wealth for a tiny minority. To begin to establish the economic foundations for such a social transformation, we advocate the nationalisation of all large banks and financial institutions, the transformation of all large-scale industrial and manufacturing corporations, including those operating within the Free Trade Zones, into publicly-owned and controlled enterprises, and the placing of all critical natural resources under public ownership and control.

#### **\* *Secure and well-paid jobs for all***

Unemployment is endemic to the present economic order. The government boasts that unemployment fell to 8.9 percent in 2003-04, but official statistics notoriously underestimate the actual rate. The level of underemployment is 21.6 percent. Youth unemployment is rampant: 36 percent of 15 to 18 year-olds have no job and 30 percent of 19 to 24 year-olds. Among high school and university graduates, 18.2 percent are unemployed. At the same time, nearly a million children aged 5-17 are compelled to engage in some form of labour to assist their poverty-stricken families. Half are under the age of 15. And these figures would rise dramatically if the districts under LTTE control were included.

Both Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse promise to create jobs. Wickremesinghe, whose government ruthlessly destroyed public sector jobs between 2002 and 2004, is pledging to create 200,000 jobs a year for the next decade—two million jobs in all. Not to be outdone, Rajapakse is promising 2.4 million jobs over six years. Before the 2004 election, his coalition declared it would create more than 100,000 jobs for university and high school graduates. To date, it has provided just 32,000 permanent posts.

The SEP proposes the expansion of jobs through the reduction of the working week to 30 hours, with no loss of pay. Billions of rupees must be provided to fund a program of public works, which will create hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs and build urgently needed public housing, schools, hospitals, roads and irrigation schemes. The immediate priority must be to reconstruct the lives of those devastated by the tsunami and two decades of civil war.

As prices continue to skyrocket, real incomes are falling. Over the five years since 2000, the real wage of plantation workers has fallen by 14 percent and for workers in the commercial and industrial sectors by 34 percent. The SEP proposes the immediate raising of the minimum wage for all workers to the monthly equivalent of 10,000 rupees (approximately \$US100), automatically indexed to the cost of living.

We advocate ending all forms of child labour and the use of young people and women on night shifts. To develop their capacities, all young people must have access to paid, professional training in government-run programs and to well-equipped cultural and sporting facilities.

#### **\* *For high quality free education***

Every young person must be allowed to develop his or her skills and creativeness to the full. At present the education system is riven by inequality—children in working class and rural areas are forced into badly equipped and understaffed public schools, while the sons and daughters of the wealthy enjoy all the benefits of advanced resources, methods and technology that money can buy.

Among the children of plantation workers, 20 percent have no access to schooling and another 44 percent receive only rudimentary primary level education. In rural areas as a whole, 30 percent of children receive only primary education. Yet in the period from 1997 to 2004, another 592 government schools were shut down while the number of private schools increased by 125. Last year, 110,000 students were eligible for university admission but only 16,500 obtained a place.

The SEP advocates a vast expansion of the public system to provide free, high quality education, up to and including university level, to all

who wish to pursue their studies. Existing schools and institutions must be upgraded to provide access to scientific laboratories, computer facilities and the latest audio-visual educational techniques, as well as to sporting and arts facilities.

**\* *For universal health care and proper welfare programs***

Despite revolutionary developments in medical science, thousands of Sri Lankans continue to die every year from preventable diseases. Malaria, mumps and tuberculosis, once considered eradicated, are on the rise again. Increasingly, those who can afford to pay use private doctors and clinics, while those who cannot are forced to use the underfunded public health system. Many cannot afford to buy prescribed drugs. Government expenditure on health as a percentage of GDP has fallen from 2.3 percent in 1997 to 1.4 percent in 2004.

The SEP advocates an intensive program for developing well-equipped and properly staffed government hospitals and clinics in order to provide high quality health care free of charge to everyone.

Poverty and lack of sufficient food remain widespread. According to a 2002 WHO report, malnutrition among children under the age of five was 46.2 percent in the war zones of the North and East and 29.4 percent for the island as a whole. Maternal malnutrition is also chronic. The limited existing programs, which are widely abused for political ends, must be replaced by a universal welfare and pension system that ensures an adequate income for all.

**\* *Decent housing for all families***

Many families live in substandard houses without basic amenities such as running water, electricity and proper toilet facilities. Rents have shot up, putting decent housing beyond the reach of masses of people. As a result of the tsunami, tens of thousands have lost their homes altogether. Within the city limits of Colombo, 51 percent of the population lives in shanties. The government's answer is to drive the poor out of the slums, in order to make the land available to big business.

The SEP advocates the construction of affordable public housing, including all essential utilities, to provide decent accommodation for all families. A system of rent control must be put in place and policed to prevent profiteering by unscrupulous landlords. Vacant houses and flats should be made available to poor families at nominal rents.

**\* *End the oppression of women workers***

Women workers are among the most oppressed layers of the working class, condemned by poverty to bear a double burden of poorly paid work and domestic drudgery. Women habitually carry out the most onerous labour—in garment factories, tea plucking, rubber tapping and other forms of agricultural work. Yet, the average female wage is only 71 percent of the male wage in the tea industry, 75 percent in the rubber industry, and 78 percent in rice cultivation.

The most obvious consequence of globalised production is the growth of the garment industry, which now employs more than 300,000 people, mostly young girls from impoverished rural areas. In the free trade zones, they labour in squalid conditions for less than \$US2 for a “flexible” working day and live in rudimentary accommodation with inadequate facilities. The ending of the previous international quota system this year threatens to consign many of these young girls back to their villages, where conditions are even worse.

In order to provide an income for their families, and the possibility of a decent education for their children, hundreds of thousands of women go to work in the Middle East as housemaids and menial workers, where they are frequently subjected to abuse by their employers. Successive governments have failed to lift a finger to defend the rights of these workers, even in the many cases of suspicious death. Colombo's main concern is not to damage this modern slave trade, which is currently the country's largest earner of foreign exchange.

The SEP defends the rights of women workers to equal pay and decent conditions, including free, high quality childcare and maternity leave on

full pay. We call for the outlawing of all forms of discrimination against women, including within the marriage laws, which relegate women to the status of second class citizens. Abortion must be legalised and made freely available to all women. While it is not possible to end centuries of stifling tradition by legal fiat, the SEP unequivocally fights for the creation of an enlightened cultural climate in which men and women alike can fully develop their talents and personality.

**\* *Alleviate the plight of small farmers***

The need for land has become more and more acute throughout the country. According to official figures, the vast majority of farmers—72 percent—have less than 1.6 hectares of land. Of these, nearly 7 percent have no land at all. Both the UNP and PA have exploited the crisis facing the landless Sinhala poor by deliberately settling them in colonies in the midst of predominantly Tamil areas, in the northern Wanni area and in the Eastern region—a policy that has served to exacerbate racial tensions.

Poor peasants everywhere have been caught in a “scissors crisis” as production costs rise but commodity prices continue to fall dramatically. Fertiliser subsidies slashed under the Wickremesinghe government have not been fully restored under the Rajapakse administration, despite the 2004 election promises. The debts of farmers are spiralling, with loans from the two major state banks nearly doubling between 2000 and 2004. Unscrupulous money lenders and middle men exact an even greater toll. As debts mount, the farmers' financial position becomes increasingly desperate. According to health ministry figures, the suicide rate per 100,000 in rural paddy-growing areas has steadily risen from 34.33 in 2000 to 35.91 in 2004.

The SEP advocates that state land be made available to all landless farmers, regardless of their ethnicity. All past debts amassed by poor farmers and fishermen must be cancelled while bank loans, agricultural equipment, fertilisers and chemicals, and fishing gear must be provided on easily affordable terms. Subsidies on agricultural inputs such as fertilisers must be reinstated and increased. The price of agricultural produce should be guaranteed to ensure a decent standard of living for farming families.

## **For the political independence of the working class**

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 working class—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party (CP) and the trade unions—have proven to be completely worthless. Having been part of bourgeois SLFP-led coalition governments in the 1960s, 1970s and again in the 1990s, the LSSP and CP function as nothing more than factions of the SLFP. At the 2004 election, the LSSP, which in the 1950s and 1960s had a broad following among workers and the rural poor, failed to win a single electorate and was only rescued from parliamentary oblivion when the SLFP allocated it a national list seat. The LSSP and CP have both endorsed Rajapakse's nomination, despite misgivings about his deals with the JVP and JHU.

The JVP, from the outset, based itself on disaffected layers of Sinhala rural youth, not the working class. In the 1990s, as support for the LSSP and CP collapsed, the JVP was able to build a trade union base through empty appeals to militancy and populist demagoguery. But the JVP-led trade unions have proven to be no different from the others. They, too, are

prepared to sacrifice the interests of workers to the constraints of the capitalist system. Moreover, the JVP, which has all but abandoned its socialist rhetoric, has been tested in office for the first time. Those who voted for it at the 2004 election as an alternative to the UNP and SLFP have had their hopes dashed. The JVP bears direct responsibility for the regressive economic measures of the Rajapakse government and of its own ministers, who held the portfolios of agriculture and fisheries.

With its support waning, the JVP has resorted to ever-more virulent Sinhala chauvinism. Its vicious campaign, in league with the rightwing JHU, against any joint organisation with the LTTE for the distribution of tsunami aid was a calculated attempt to set the victims of the disaster in the Sinhala south against Tamil and Muslim victims in the North and East. Since quitting the government in June, the JVP has intensified its denunciations of the P-TOMS agreement and the ceasefire as “a betrayal” of the nation. The fascistic character of its propaganda recalls its campaign in the late 1980s against the Indo-Lanka Accord, during which gangs of JVP thugs murdered scores of workers, trade union officials and political opponents who refused to support their protests and strikes.

The working class should also reject the various petty bourgeois radical organisations such as the Democratic Left Front (DLF), the New Left Front (NLF) of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP). The chief characteristic of these outfits is their nationalism and opportunism. Organically hostile to a principled political struggle for the independent mobilisation of the working class, these “socialist” parties have a long and sordid history of political manoeuvres with the major bourgeois parties.

In this election, the DLF is openly supporting Rajapakse. The NLF and USP are taking a slightly different tack—standing their own presidential candidates, but indicating that they regard Wickremesinghe as the “lesser evil”. Both parties have been uncritical advocates of the so-called peace process and call for a “federal solution” to the war, in line with the various peace deals pushed by big business and the major powers. They criticise privatisation and “market reform,” not from the standpoint of abolishing global capitalism, but of promoting the utopian illusion that the clock can be wound back more than three decades to the heyday of national economic regulation.

### **The struggle for socialism in South Asia**

The Socialist Equality Party is based on the great traditions of the international socialist movement—egalitarianism, internationalism and the material and spiritual liberation of mankind from oppression and want—which are embodied today in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

In 1917 a mass popular movement in Russia, guided by the program of scientific socialism, overthrew capitalism and established the Soviet Union. While the Russian revolution was part of, and inspired, a broader international socialist movement, the defeat of revolutionary struggles elsewhere created enormous pressures, expressed in the isolation of the first workers state and the emergence of a repressive, bureaucratic apparatus, headed by Joseph Stalin. Abandoning the internationalism of the Bolshevik Party, Stalin advanced the anti-Marxist perspective of “building socialism in a single country”.

On the basis of this nationalist conception, the Stalinist bureaucracy betrayed the October Revolution, destroyed workers’ democracy, liquidated the genuine Marxists and subverted the revolutionary struggles of the working class around the world. Throughout Asia, Stalinist parties have played a key role in upholding the capitalist order. The Indonesian Communist Party’s collaboration with the bourgeois nationalist Sukarno

paved the way for the CIA-backed coup of 1965-66, which saw the murder of more than half a million Indonesian workers and party members. In India, the Stalinists of the CPI and CPI-M are still trying to breathe life back into the rotting corpse of the Congress Party. By 1991, the reactionary logic of Stalinism and its collaboration with imperialism had culminated in the breakup of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. In China, the “communist” leadership has used its police state regime to turn the country into the sweatshop of the world, reproducing all the social evils of 19th century capitalism on a massive scale.

Our movement bases itself on the legacy of the best, most courageous and far-sighted representatives of the working class who continued the struggle for socialist internationalism. The greatest embodiment of this tradition was Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian revolution, who led the fight against the betrayals of Stalinism and laid the basis for the rebirth of the international workers movement through the founding of the Fourth International in 1938.

These events struck deep roots in the working class of Sri Lanka and South Asia. In the 1940s, based on the political struggle waged by Trotsky against Stalinism, the Sri Lankan Trotskyists played a key role in founding the BLPI, applying the principles of Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution to the development of a democratic and socialist perspective for the working class and oppressed masses of the Indian subcontinent. The destruction of the BLPI, which culminated in the LSSP’s betrayal in 1964, played no small part in the continued dominance of Stalinism throughout Asia.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), forerunner of the SEP, was founded in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in a direct political struggle against the LSSP’s national opportunism. For three-and-a-half decades, the RCL and SEP have intransigently opposed all forms of chauvinism, discrimination and oppression, championed the democratic rights of the working class and rural poor and sought to theoretically clarify the dangers posed by nationalist politics.

The challenge facing the working class in Sri Lanka and throughout the region is to revive and develop the great socialist traditions and ideas that animated the early struggles of the BLPI and the LSSP. Central to that task is the assimilation of the lessons of the strategic experiences of the international working class throughout the twentieth century, including the critical struggles in India and Sri Lanka.

We urge all those who recognise the urgent need for a genuine peace and the transformation of society along socialist lines to actively support our election campaign. This means helping to publicise our candidates and meetings, distributing and discussing our election material and encouraging the widest possible audience for the *World Socialist Web Site*, the internet centre of the ICFI.

Above all, we call on all those who agree with our program and perspective to join and build the Socialist Equality Party as the new political party of the working class.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**