Sri Lankan SEP holds election meeting in Kandy

Our correspondent
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Wije Dias, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka, addressed a public meeting in Kandy as part of his campaign. A cross-section of university students, workers and professionals attended the SEP meeting held in the D.S. Senanayake Public Library Auditorium in the centre of the city. Kandy is in the central hills districts, is one of the island's largest cities and historically a capital of the Sinhalese kingdoms.

SEP members and sympathisers campaigned extensively prior to the meeting distributing 12,000 copies in Sinhala and Tamil of the party's election material. The discussion was often lively with many people expressing their disgust with the two major parties. Few people thought that the many election promises would be kept.

One young person in the residential area of Deyyanewela expressed the widespread alienation: "We refuse to support any of these candidates, we don't care who takes power this time, it will solve none of our problems, we are sick of these crafty promises.... These fake promises are being reproduced in this election too. Nothing is going to change, and we know it!" he remarked.

At the University of Peradeniya, student union leaders attempted to block the SEP's campaign among striking students at the Arts Faculty. These leaders are connected to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Sinhala chauvinist organisation that still claims on occasions to be "socialist" and "Marxist". In the election, the JVP is backing the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP), a longstanding party of the ruling class.

The student leaders rather nervously told SEP campaigners that they "do not allow external political forces" on the campus and hinted at physical violence. Several of the students reacted angrily to the crude attempt to censor the SEP, emailed the party seeking further discussion and attended the public meeting.

SEP Political Committee member Ananda Dawulagala chaired the meeting. Introducing the SEP candidate, he explained that the main purpose of the SEP's campaign was to open a political discussion among working people in Sri Lanka, and more broadly in South Asia about the social, economic and democratic issues confronting them.

Wije Dias began by pointing to the unprecedented lists of election promises being unfurled by the candidates of the two major parties—Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse of the SLFP and Ranil Wickremesinghe of the opposition United National Party (UNP).

"The reason for these lengthy lists of promises is the unprecedented alienation of the masses from these two bourgeois parties. If the masses are to be rallied again, these parties have to unleash streams of lies that go beyond even their own previous lies," he said.

Dias noted that the two candidates, especially Rajapakse, had not left out any section of society from their long lists of promises. "Isn't it an indictment against both of these parties? There are such a vast number of unresolved questions facing the masses after 57 years of their rule that they have to make all these promises."

He explained that the SEP opposed the main bourgeois parties and all of their allies, including the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Communist Party (CP), JVP and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU).

"There are two serious dangers behind the smokescreen of promises in this election. The first one is the danger of a return of the civil war that has already claimed the lives of more than 60,000 Sinhala and Tamil people and displaced more than a million for 20

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years. And developing hand in hand with the danger of war is the threat of moves to crush democratic rights. To defeat these two dangers, the working class must take the initiative on the basis of an international socialist program as the leader of the oppressed masses. The only party, which advocates that program in Sri Lanka is the SEP."

On the day before the SEP meeting, Rajapakse released his election manifesto entitled "Mahinda Chintanaya" or "Mahinda thinking". Dias explained: "The main points in that manifesto are the eradication of class antagonisms and the coordination of law, police and social institutions, which means mainly the religious establishments.... All these are aimed at the defence of bourgeois property and the capitalist rule through the bourgeois state, police and bourgeois law. This is not an accident in a situation where many sections of the working people are already actively opposing the various attacks on their social conditions. Even at election time, the capitalist politicians are forced to reveal their plans to crush protests."

Dias explained that successive governments had moved to undermine basic democratic rights utilising the powers of the executive presidency established in 1978. He said that all the major parties—the SLFP, JVP and UNP—had collaborated in the parliament on the previous day to extend the present emergency regulations for another month up to the election day itself. He warned that such measures laid the basis for dictatorial forms of rule.

"Today the necessity of an alternative political perspective for working people is being highlighted in an unprecedented way. The SEP addresses that necessity. We insist that under the present changed world conditions where the imperialist powers, US in the main, are pursuing an aggressive neo-colonial policy that working people should be armed with the political perspective for a socialist transformation, which can meet the needs of the working class and oppressed masses in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally."

Dias said that the program of international socialism was not strange or accidental. "In Sri Lanka the political traditions of the working class are rooted in internationalist foundations. The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) was founded in 1968 to revive that proud history of Sri Lankan working class to fight for internationalism." The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) betrayed those principles in 1964 by entering into the bourgeois SLFP coalition of Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

In contrast to Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe, Dias said, the SEP is not making any empty election promises. "We present proposals for the working class to begin to think as an international class and act politically independent of the bourgeois parties and their left hangers on. The working class must turn to study its own history. With that understanding, workers must take the initiative to fight for a socialist program to rally the poor and solve the problems of every section of the masses including Tamil people, the oppressed peasants and the unemployed."

A number of people stayed behind to speak to Dias and other SEP members. Sivam said he had been a Communist Party member and previously supported the old left. "But now this so-called left is left in extreme right!" he said, pointing to the fact that the LSSP and CP are supporting Rajapakse, despite his alliance with the Sinhala extremists of JVP and JHU.

Weeratillake, a graduate from University of Peradeniya, said: "I believe that a serious alternative is badly needed to solve the war and economic problems in our country. I listened to the lecture and I have already read some of the printed material too. I can see a good future in this program. It must attract the attention of the masses."

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