

SEP campaign in Sri Lankan election: interest in a socialist alternative

Our correspondents

31 October 2005

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is carrying out an extensive campaign for its policies in the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka. Its candidate Wije Dias is the party's general secretary and a member of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Campaign teams have been distributing copies of the SEP's socialist policies in Tamil and Sinhala in the capital Colombo as well as around the coastal town of Chilaw to the north and the tea plantation districts, including Kandy, Hatton, Badulla and Bandarawela. SEP members have also campaigned in Jaffna in the war-ravaged Northern Province and in the areas hit by the December 26 tsunami in the south around Ambalangoda and Galle.

Many people expressed their disgust with the two bourgeois parties—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and United National Party (UNP)—as well as with the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which made significant gains in the general election last year. In office for the first time as part of the SLFP-led ruling coalition, the JVP ditched its promises and backed the ongoing assault on jobs and living standards.

The SEP is the only party in the presidential elections presenting a socialist alternative to the working class to end war and social inequality. All the other parties and candidates are lining up, either directly or indirectly, behind the SLFP's candidate Mahinda Rajapakse or the UNP's Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The views expressed to a campaign team in the Colombo suburb of Jayawadanagama give an indication of the resentment and alienation among broad layers of the working class and middle class.

Gunaseena, a laid-off worker from Nylon Six plant at Sapugaskand, angrily explained how the free market policies of successive governments had destroyed his job.

“Around 500 workers were laid off when the Nylon Six plant was privatised about four years ago. Our trade union leaders told us they received pledges from all the main parties over past few years to look into our problems. But once they came to power, they just ignored our problem. Now I am over 50 and no one will give me a job,” he said.

“I am thoroughly disgusted with this system. Even though we

obtained a court order for compensation, the government said there was no money to implement the court decision. I was a member of the JVP-controlled trade union but the JVP was in the last government and paid no attention to us. I am against them.”

Gunaseena said workers at Kabool Lanka, a state-owned textile firm that was privatised, had a similar experience. About 3,000 were laid off by a Korean company which abandoned the factory after receiving huge bank loans.

He warned that workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) and Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) would come under attack after the election. He pointed out that the SLFP had promised to halt their privatisation prior to the general election last year but then sold off part of the CPC to an Indian company and prepared for a major restructuring of the CEB.

“I do not know exactly what we should do to avoid this situation. I am so disgusted with this system that I have decided to spoil my vote. However, I would like to look at your program seriously and make a decision,” Gunaseena said.

A freelance journalist said most of the people she knew expressed contempt toward the poll because nothing good happened under any government. “These elections have become just deals between parties. Recently I was at a meeting where Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) gave their support to the UNP. There were no real principles. My question is how are you going to be progressive if you come to power one day?”

Kusum Ratnaweera, who works at the Colombo Municipal Council, said the workloads were so heavy that workers had no time to think about politics. People knew the promises of the political leaders were lies, she said. Other women in the same area were concerned about a return to war and communal violence. One blamed the Sinhala extremist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) for fomenting conflict between Buddhists and Christians. She had seen a communal mob destroy a church at Homagama.

Another woman declared: “I am completely against the war; once the JVP killed poor people and the soldiers. Governments are recruiting young people to the armed forces to send them to war against the Tamil people. Many youth who joined the army have died, while others lost a hand or a leg.

“The country is bankrupt. What will happen to the future generations? Some people get 100,000 rupees [\$US980] a month as wages. But the people who do the hard work only get 3,000 or less a month,” she said. Opposing the US occupation of Iraq, she added: “Saddam Hussein may have been wrong. But America is annihilating the people of Iraq. Our politicians supported America. And they have embraced open economic policy.”

At Colombo University, Navodinie was enthusiastic about the SEP campaign. She said the SEP was the only party putting forward a socialist program. In the university, Navodinie said, students were taught about the “bankruptcy of the socialism”. But the lecturers were unable to defend capitalism because it had no solution to the problems of mankind.

Another student added: “I did not know that the Lanka Sama Samaja Party was a Trotskyist party earlier. It is interesting to hear that you built your party in 1968 in a struggle against the betrayal of the LSSP in 1964. It is good you continued the struggle for socialism despite the difficulties.”

A third student, Manusha, was attracted to SEP’s internationalist perspective and agreed that none of the problems facing working people in Sri Lanka could be solved within the confines of the island. “If your ideas can spread among the masses of Sri Lanka we could make an enormous change,” he said.

Campaign teams in Kandy, in the central hills districts, found a number of young people and students interested in a genuine socialist alternative.

R. M., a computer science student, said: “I totally agree with the WSWS when you argue for an international solution to the prevailing problems of mankind. Ethnic issues, human rights, natural resources—none of these problems can be solved within the limits of our county or of any other country. I want to know more about why the working class or the proletariat is the decisive factor in this fight.

“I also fully support the idea of withdrawing troops from north and east as the primary step to end the war in Sri Lanka.”

Chandana, a graduate from the Kelaniya campus, is working as a music teacher in a remote, underprivileged agricultural village of Véndaruwa in the district surrounding Kandy. He agreed with the SEP that the major parties protected the interests of the rich, rather than cared for the welfare of the majority.

“We are also disappointed in the left parties because they want us to believe that the UNP or SLFP will keep their promises. Previously, the JVP protested on behalf of students, unemployed youth and poor people. Now it is clear that they have joined up with the same currents of the existing order. What I understand is their chauvinism and warmongering has nothing in common with socialism,” he said.

During the campaign for public meetings in Ambalangoda and Galle in southern Sri Lanka, the SEP teams visited a number of villages that had been hit by the devastating tsunami

on December 26, including Patabendimulla, Kanda, Bagahawatta and Porambe.

At Patabendimulla, the shanties of 19 families, all of them poor, were completely washed away by the huge waves. When SEP members visited, they were still living in temporary accommodation.

M.H. Sirisoma, 45, explained: “We lived Patabendimulla, in Ambalangoda, close to the cemetery. The tsunami destroyed all the houses. The 19 families lived altogether in a camp near the cemetery for two months. After that we came to this new place, Halwathura, which had earlier been reserved as the site of a pre-school.

“These temporary houses have been built by the NGOs [non-government organizations]. Each house is occupied by about 6 people. The size is 17 feet x 12 feet. They built these houses for electricity but for the past 10 months we have had no electricity connection.

“The tsunami destroyed my two boats and fishing gear. I have received no assistance as yet to start fishing again. Though promises were made [by the government] about houses, there are no such programs. To fish, we have to go out in the boats of other people. The government has given no help. The 19 temporary houses have only 4 toilets. No one has come to check the hygienic or the health situation here. Not a single politician has come to see us.”

Sirisoma said his two sons had passed the secondary school O Level exam, but were still unemployed. He and others had “no faith in the political parties,” he said, declaring he would not vote for anyone.

A widow explained that she was forced to survive with her family on a mere 600 rupees (\$US6) a month handed out under the government’s samurdhi welfare scheme. Out of that, 250 rupees was used for rations and 40 rupees was deducted for an insurance and housing fund. When her husband died, she received 4,000 rupees from the insurance scheme. “That is the only help I got for the past 11 years, other than what I get as items and money,” she declared angrily.

“I have a son and a daughter. I want to educate them. But with this tiny income, how can I do it? However much politicians boast on the political stage about the success of the samurdhi scheme, it has not improved our lives. We have no faith in the speeches at the election meetings of the UNP and SLFP candidates promising to increase the samurdhi support. This is empty talk to get votes, not because they sympathise with us,” she said.



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