

Sri Lankan SEP holds first election meeting in Colombo

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held the first public meeting in its campaign for the November 17 presidential election in Colombo on October 4. More than 100 workers, young people and professionals came to listen to the SEP's candidate Wije Dias and other SEP speakers, who addressed the meeting in both Sinhala and Tamil.

SEP Political Committee member K. Ratnayake chaired the meeting and introduced Dias, who is the SEP's General Secretary and a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board. He explained that Dias was the only socialist candidate and had been a principled fighter for Trotskyism, that is socialist internationalism, for nearly four decades.

Ratnayake outlined the volatile situation in Sri Lanka and internationally, highlighting the role of US militarism in heightening political tensions. None of the major parties have any solutions to the political and social problems confronting working people here or anywhere else, he explained. Instead they are engaged in an unprecedented campaign of false promises, hoping to overcome the alienation and disgust felt by voters to the entire political establishment.

Wije Dias began by referring to the response of the media, which has previously studiously ignored the SEP's existence. The SEP has been approached by journalists—local and international—wanting to know why the SEP is running in the elections.

"Perhaps they were somewhat surprised to see the SEP, which has no broad-based electoral machine, challenging the two main bourgeois parties. Our challenge has never been about vote catching. The task undertaken by the SEP is to educate and politically prepare the working people to face up to the historic challenge they face. By contesting this presidential election, the SEP has embarked on an island-wide campaign for the first time," Dias said.

"Our campaign, however, will not be limited to the coastal boundaries of this island. We will address the working class and oppressed masses throughout the Indian sub-continent and Asia as well as their class brothers and sisters globally.

It is only by unifying the Sinhala and Tamil workers in Sri Lanka with the international working class that a path can be cut to extricate the masses from the suffocating exploitation and oppression they confront."

Dias pointed to the experience of American workers devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The Bush administration completely ignored the urgent needs of the hurricane victims and utilised the disaster to deploy the military to the devastated areas to impose the authority of the state. At the same time, it is waging brutal colonial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The working people of Sri Lanka had a similar experience when the tsunami hit on December 26.

"Whether in an underdeveloped, developing or developed capitalist country, the callous indifference of the ruling elites toward the masses is exposed by these disasters. This is why we insist that the working class, which is the only the social force capable of replacing this capitalist system, must take the initiative for a socialist transformation of society. We advocate the building a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as a part of a Socialist Republic of South Asia and in the final analysis as a part of a global union of socialist republics."

Dias explained that the issue of ending the war in Sri Lanka was central to the election campaign. He noted that Mahinda Rajapakse, candidate for the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), along with his backers in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), have denied that they are calling for war. "Yes, they are not openly calling for the war. But they are proposing policies that will provoke the war," he said.

Dias cited the comments of JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe in *Irida Divaina* last Sunday, who declared: "We did not call for the dissolution of the army. We called for the strengthening of the army. To give a backbone to the army. To regain the army's position of advantage that [United National Party (UNP) candidate] Ranil Wickremesinghe deprived it of. Only by that could the LTTE be brought to the negotiating table". Dias asked: "If this is not the path to war, then what is it? Rajapakse is tied

to the JVP's policies.”

The candidate also pointed to the remarks of JHU secretary Udaya Gammanpilla in the same newspaper. Gammanpilla dismissed the importance of the Tamil vote, stating: “There is no significance in the Tamil minority votes because its importance has been reduced by the migration of Tamils to Western countries starting from 1983. This migration has increased the electoral weight of the Sinhala people even without a significant natural growth.”

Dias pointed out that these comments were nothing but a thinly veiled glorification of the war that began in 1983. “What he says is ‘we have driven out the Tamils through the war and pushed up the status of the Sinhalese.’ That is the boast he is making. That’s why we say the threat of war is looming. So this is the time for the working class to take an initiative to stop the war based upon its own independent policy.”

The speaker also warned of the threats being made by top military officers against antiwar filmmakers. “This is a new phenomena,” he said. “Previously the same military leaders may have been grinding their teeth over antiwar films as well as the SEP, which has consistently campaigned against the war. Now they have come forward to publicly issue threats. It is the open entry of the military into political life.”

Dias pointed out that UNP candidate Wickremesinghe had said nothing about the military’s anti-democratic moves. Like the SLFP, the UNP has no solution to the war and made appeals to Sinhala chauvinism. He noted that Wickremesinghe had attempted to woo the Buddhist hierarchy by promising to build the world’s highest *Dagabha* (Buddhist place of worship).

Dias explained that the peace talks initiated by Wickremesinghe, as prime minister between 2001 and 2004, were a fraud. “He sought a deal with the Tamil bourgeois LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] to end the war because of the pressure of investors and local business. The UNP proved incapable of reaching a powersharing arrangement with the LTTE, or more broadly addressing the democratic rights of the Tamil people. This is an expression of the reactionary nature of the capitalist class as a whole,” he said.

Dias warned that, whether Rajapakse or Wickremesinghe won the presidency, the assault on the democratic rights and living standards of working people would intensify. In these conditions, the so-called left parties—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP) as well as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP)—offer no alternative. Either directly or indirectly, they tie working people to one or other of the two major bourgeois parties.

Dias explained: “In complete contrast, the SEP has its

roots in the struggle for the political independence of the working class against the LSSP’s betrayal in 1964 when it entered a bourgeois coalition led by Sirima Bandaranaike. We have never wavered on this principled struggle in our 37-year history.” He concluded by urging those attending to actively support the SEP’s election campaign and to join the party.

Many of those in attendance stayed behind to discuss the SEP’s policies with party members and to purchase literature. The audience responded to an appeal for financial assistance by contributing 5,800 rupees to the SEP’s 500,000 rupee election fund.

S.T., an art student from the University of Colombo, told the WWS: “I have studied some of the writings of Trotsky and through Trotsky we can see the doctrine presented by Marx. I would like to see the spread of Trotskyism all over the world. That’s why I came to participate in this meeting. Since the 1920s, Trotsky fought against the Stalinist theory of socialism in one country. Socialism is an international program. The SEP has correctly oriented its election campaign on this internationalist line.

“The JVP is a party that has signalled to the left and turned to the right. The JVP is one more capitalist party and is highly opportunist. Today, commonly, university students are not attracted to the JVP. I experience that at my university. Within capitalism, there is no possibility for human liberation. We should bring these ideas to the masses. This presidential election will be a good opportunity for that.”

Ajith, a political science student from the same university, said: “We are looking for an alternative. We are disgusted with the JVP and their pretences. From our limited knowledge of your party we know it is somehow different from the lefts. We really want to oppose imperialism. We are against the attack by the US on the Iraqi people.” He and his friends agreed to help the SEP campaign.

Journalists from Sinhala daily *Lankadeepa*, Sinhala weekly *Silumina* and Tamil daily *Veerakesari*, as well as television crews from the government-owned channel Rupavahini and the private channel Sirasa TV covered the meeting. The Tamil radio service Suriyan FM reported on the SEP meeting in its news bulletin. Sirasa TV and the associated Tamil and English channels—Sakthi TV and MTV—carried footage of the meeting.



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