

SEP presidential candidate from Sri Lanka addresses Madras meeting

A correspondent
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Despite considerable efforts to prevent it going ahead, Wije Dias, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate in the November 17 presidential election in Sri Lanka, addressed a public meeting of workers, students, teachers and housewives in Madras in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu last Sunday. Those who attended displayed a keen interest in the internationalist perspective presented by Dias and Peter Symonds, a member of the WWS International Editorial Board and the Australian SEP.

In introducing the speakers, the chairman explained that the meeting had been subjected to close scrutiny by the police investigation branch, which monitors political activities throughout the country. Late on Saturday afternoon, the managers of the advertised venue abruptly cancelled the booking, saying that a fire had damaged the electrical system in the hall. On investigation, the claim proved to be false. But the owner refused to honour the booking or provide an explanation for the cancellation. At the last minute, an alternate venue was booked.

The evidence points to the likelihood that pressure was brought to bear on the hall owner, either by the police or political parties opposed to the SEP. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has close contact with refugees from northern Sri Lanka who live in Tamil Nadu, and is supported by several parties based in the state. The campaign for the meeting attracted considerable interest among students, Tamil refugees and workers. Reports appeared in three newspapers—the *Hindu*, the *Indian Express* and *Dinamani*—highlighting the SEP's socialist alternative to the communalist and separatist policies of the LTTE.

An extensive campaign prior to the meeting involved the distribution of 15,000 leaflets in Tamil containing the SEP's election manifesto and various statements by Dias. Campaign teams held discussions with students at a number of hostels where the issue of socialism and the role of various Stalinist parties frequently arose. Leaflets were also distributed at the Puzhal and Kummudipoondi Sri Lankan refugee camps outside Madras where many Tamils fled from the war in the North and East of Sri Lanka, particularly after the 1983 communal pogrom. Among workers and students alike there was widespread disgust with the existing political parties and a keen interest in the SEP's perspective of uniting workers of all backgrounds.

In his address to the meeting, Peter Symonds began by saying: "For those who view politics through the prism of parliament and elections, it will appear odd, even absurd, that the candidate of the Socialist Equality Party for the Sri Lankan presidency is addressing a meeting in Madras. After all, there are few if any here who can vote for him. Even stranger is the fact that he is speaking alongside an Australian citizen.

"For the International Committee of the Fourth International [ICFI], however, there is nothing strange about this at all. We function as a world party, because we are based on an international perspective and program. We insist that none of the immense social and political problems confronting the international working class can be resolved within the confines of the nation state—no matter how small or large that state may

happen to be."

Symonds explained that the most destabilising factor in world politics today was the eruption of US militarism, above all the illegal invasion and subjugation of Iraq. He pointed out that all of the lies used to justify the war had been graphically exposed, including the claims that the US and its allies were bringing democracy and peace to Iraq. The country had sunk into a quagmire—at least 100,000 Iraqis had died, the country's infrastructure had disintegrated and poverty and unemployment were rampant.

"The target of the US invasion was not so much the Hussein regime in Baghdad but America's imperialist rivals in Europe and Asia, which, prior to the invasion, were seeking to end the UN sanctions and making deals to advance their own interests in Iraq. For the last decade and a half, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Washington has sought to exploit its residual military strength to establish its untrammelled hegemony over the world at the expense of its rivals."

The speaker explained that while the Bush administration represented the most rapacious sections of the US ruling class, this strategy, despite important tactical differences, was embraced by the entire political establishment. He said that the eruption of US militarism confirmed the analysis made by the International Committee of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This did not represent the end of socialism but rather the collapse of Stalinism and its program of national economic regulation. It had ushered in, not a new golden age of capitalism, but the slide towards war, social inequality and the destruction of basic democratic rights.

Symonds pointed out that Washington's reckless military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq were not a sign of strength but of weakness. The US was the world's largest debtor country and was wracked by social tensions. The Bush administration was plunging from one crisis to the next, the latest being the indictment of vice-presidential chief of staff—Lewis Libby—on charges directly related to the lies told to justify the Iraq war. The speaker provided details and indices of the deepening gulf between rich and poor in the US.

"Hurricane Katrina tore the mask off the carefully cultivated myth that the operations of the free market have produced a society in which everyone is rich and everyone has plenty. The policies of every US administration over the last two and a half decades have gutted social services, including emergency services. Even though US authorities had more warning than their counterparts in South Asia had of the December 26 tsunami, their response was just as inadequate and just as contemptuous of the poor."

In conclusion, Symonds warned that the Bush administration would resort to new military adventures in response to its deepening political crisis. "Workers cannot put any faith in any of the parties of the bourgeoisie or their hangers-on among the Stalinist parties and various middle class radical outfits. The only social force capable of halting the slide towards war is the international working class. The ICFI is seeking to develop a global counteroffensive by uniting the working class against

imperialism and the predatory activities of global capital.”

Wije Dias began by reviewing the failure of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie over the past half century to meet the social needs and democratic aspirations of working people; and he cited a series of statistics pointing to the growing gulf between rich and poor. The central issue, he explained, was the failure of both major parties—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP) to end the war.

“Although a ceasefire agreement was signed between the Colombo government and the LTTE in February 2002, the threat of war never receded. The so-called peace process was initiated, not to grant long-denied democratic rights to the Tamil people, but to work out a power-sharing deal with the LTTE to open up the north and east of the island for local and foreign investors.” He explained that the peace process had stalled because both the SLFP and UNP were mired in Sinhala chauvinism. While UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe advocated a return to peace talks, he, like his bourgeois opponent SFLP Mahinda Rajapakse, was incapable of allowing any concessions to the democratic rights of the Tamil majority.

Dias said that the political and social crisis was not peculiar to the island state of Sri Lanka but faced working people throughout South Asia. “The destruction of jobs under the disinvestment programs, the cuts in welfare spending, the increase of unemployment among youth, the reduction of subsidies to the poor peasants engaged in subsistence agriculture are common throughout the sub-continent, as well as other former colonies in the region.

“Due to the historical weakness of the bourgeoisie, which was handed the reins of power by its imperialist masters to look after their interests, governments throughout the region have relied on whipping up communal tensions to divide their adversary—the working class. India was dismembered into three parts, and in Sri Lanka, the citizenship rights of over a million Tamil speaking workers were abolished. In Malaysia, the racist Boomiputra movement was instigated for the same purpose. These communal politics have led to pogroms, carnage and war.

“The tsunami which hit South Asia on December 26 instantly exposed the rampant poverty that exists throughout the region. More than 90 percent of the people who perished and lost their homes were the poorest of the poor. The utter disregard of every government for this huge tragedy was because the politicians had written off the lives of the victims as an unnecessary burden even before the tsunami hit. Ten months after the disaster, most of the victims are still living in squalor.

“The objective basis exists for the struggle for a union of socialist states in South Asia as part of the struggle for world socialism. Our perspective for such a union is not some kind of utopia, but a practical necessity if the working class is to defend its interests. What is needed is the rational re-organisation of the economy in the region and internationally to assure decent living conditions for all.

Dias emphasised that a socialist program could not be implemented within the confines of the nation state system, which had become a barrier to the progressive utilisation and development of the productive forces for the benefit of the mankind. The precondition for the struggle for a socialist solution was the international unity of the working class.

“The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 conclusively proved that the false theory of the Stalinist bureaucracy of building socialism in a single country is unviable and reactionary. National socialist programs are inevitably rooted in an opportunist adaptation to the nation state and the capitalist system. This has been the case with the Stalinist Communist parties in every country, including those in Sri Lanka and India.

“Leon Trotsky, the co-leader with Lenin of the great October revolution, began a struggle against the nationalist degeneration of the Soviet bureaucracy in 1923, and founded the Fourth International in 1938 to continue the struggle for international socialism begun by Marx and Engels in the middle of the nineteenth century.

“During the early 1940s and in the midst of the Second World War, the Fourth International laid deep roots within the working class in the Indian sub-continent, including Sri Lanka, and also in other parts of South Asia, like Vietnam. The Bolshevik Leninist Party of India [BLPI], with its branch in Sri Lanka, fought under the banner of the Fourth International and offered an internationalist program for the working class in the sub-continent for national liberation from British colonialism and for socialism.

“But soon after formal independence was granted as part of the post-war settlement, this struggle was abandoned, as the BLPI adapted to the artificially created states in divided India and Sri Lanka. The India wide party was liquidated into national reformist parties like the Congress Socialists of Jaya Praksh Narain in India and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party [LSSP] in Sri Lanka. This was despite the fact that tens of thousands of workers in workplaces like the B&C mills, here in Madras, were following the BLPI leadership, as well as over 50,000 workers who heeded the BLPI’s call in Sri Lanka to denounce the bogus independence as a conspiracy against the real struggle for liberation.

“The degeneration of the BLPI leaders reached its climax when, as part of the LSSP, they joined the capitalist government of Sirima Bandaranaike. By blocking an independent political path for the working class, the LSSP betrayal led to the development of communal parties in the south and north of the island and was thus a major factor in the outbreak of civil war in 1983.”

Dias concluded by outlining the major planks of the SEP’s program, including its demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan troops from the North and East of the island and its perspective for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a Union of Socialist States in South Asia and internationally. He called on those present to study the program of the ICFI, to start systematically reading the *World Socialist Web Site* and to apply to join the Trotskyist movement.

The two speeches provoked a series of questions including: how was the SEP going to implement socialism; was China socialist; was the collapse of the Soviet Union responsible for the eruption of US militarism; could the working class defeat imperialism as in Vietnam and Cuba. After the meeting, most of the audience stayed behind to discuss with the speakers, and several spoke with WWSWS reporters.

A young driver said: “I learnt a lot from the meeting. This is the first time I came to know about the real situation in United States. Before attending the meeting, I thought there were no poor there. But now I understand the situation is different. There are poor masses and also workers. Normally all the newspapers tell us lies. They say everything is fine in America. I would like to know more about the real situation in America and what is happening internationally.

“The other thing that struck me was that there is no solution to any of our problems on a national basis. Internationalism is essential. It was a completely new thing for me. To any question we face, social or political, there needs to be international solutions. The idea of the Socialist United States of the Indian subcontinent is good. All the other parties are dividing working people. We have to unite them.”

A first year law student said: “I came here to find out about the party. It is interesting. I like the idea of social equality. Socialism is equality. Everybody has to be treated equally, not like at present. Now people are subjected to oppression like before independence. Sometimes I think it would have been better if we didn’t have any independence.

“I come from a village. My family has two acres of land. We can’t live with that. Most of the people are like that. Few people have a lot of wealth in their hands. So equality is essential. To achieve it, all should unite.

“My father is a small farmer. He has to give me 1,000 rupees a month for my studies. It is difficult for him. We also face a lot of difficulties in the hostels. Around 20 students share one room. There is only room to

sleep. We can't all stay there in the daytime. The food is bad. Most of the times it is one curry and rice. We sleep on reed mats. The place is very dirty, but the administration is not worried about it.

"I think the report given by the Sri Lankan presidential candidate, Wije Dias, was good. He has been in the Marxist movement for more than 40 years and has a lot of experience, which was revealed in his report."

Asked about the US invasion of Iraq, he said: "We oppose the US invasion of Iraq. There are no weapons of mass destruction in that country. It was invented by Washington to invade Iraq. It is only to grab the oil. Now I know that in America also there are a lot of attacks against the masses and democratic rights are being curtailed."

Another student told us: "Tomorrow I am sitting for my exam. It is a difficult exam. All my friends are studying. But I have understood many issues by attending this meeting. Internationalism is an essential thing. The working masses in all countries face the same problems, whether in big capitalist countries like the US or in countries like India.

"I want to see a socialist society. Social equality is also essential. That is why I came to the meeting. Though I am sitting for the exam tomorrow, I am glad that I attended the meeting. I will attend any meeting you organise. You speak very differently from all the others.

"I learnt a lot about politics and socialism. Before coming here, I thought all parties were corrupt and that there was no way out of the present crisis. Now I know that there is an alternative to the present society which is creating great misery for the ordinary masses."



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