Colombo meeting concludes Sri Lankan SEP election campaign

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held its final public meeting for the November 17 presidential election in Colombo on Saturday afternoon. More than 150 workers, students, intellectuals and housewives came to hear the SEP candidate and general secretary Wije Dias. A number had travelled for hours from Kandy and Bandarawela in the central hills districts and from Ambalangoda in the south of the island.

The meeting was also addressed by SEP Political Committee member Vilani Peiris and Peter Symonds, a member of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) from the Australian SEP. The meeting was conducted in three languages—English, Tamil and Sinhala. Despite the time taken for translation, the audience followed the speeches carefully.

The SEP has conducted an extensive campaign over the past six weeks, including 11 public meetings and several informal discussions in diverse parts of the island. These included meetings at Galle, Kurunagala, Polonnarunwa and Matara where the party has not had active branches. Dias has given a wide range of interviews to newspapers and television and three half-hour addresses in time allocated on state-owned TV and radio. He also took part in a two-hour TV debate with United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) MPs on the Swarnavahina TV channel on the rising cost of living.

Prior to last Saturday's meeting, SEP members carried out a concentrated campaign in and around Colombo. Thousands of election manifestos and 25,000 leaflets were distributed. Party teams campaigned door-to-door in Dematagoda, Jayawadanagama and Slave Island, among workers at railway stations and bus stands and at universities.

Opening the meeting, the chairman K. Ratnayake said a balance sheet of the parties in the presidential election could now be drawn. The main capitalist candidates—Mahinda Rajapakse of the ruling SLFP and UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe—had proved they had nothing to offer the masses except empty promises. Only the SEP and its candidate Dias had advanced a viable socialist and internationalist perspective to prepare the working class for the struggles ahead.

Vilani Peiris said the election was taking place amid a series of attacks on democratic rights. She pointed out that a Supreme Court ruling had just imposed severe restrictions on voters from areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Not only had the decision barred the establishment of polling stations in LTTE areas but booths had to be at least one kilometre from the line of control. "We oppose this discrimination against the Tamil masses and the suppression of their democratic rights. The SEP demands that they should have the right to vote in their residential areas," she said

Peter Symonds outlined the international context in which the presidential election was taking place. As a member of the Australian SEP, he said it was quite natural to be addressing the SEP meeting in Colombo as all the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) fight for the same strategy in every country. "The election campaign here is part of our broad and integrated strategy to mobilise workers around the world against global capitalism," he said.

Symonds recalled that just over a year ago, Bill Van Auken, the presidential candidate for the US SEP, addressed meetings in Colombo and Kandy emphasising the necessity for a counteroffensive by working people around the world against the eruption of US imperialism. The same axis animated the Australian SEP's election campaign in October 2004 and that of the German Partei für Soziale Gleichheit this September.

Symonds said that to build an international movement to combat capitalism required more than a vague sense of class solidarity. It required a worked-out political program grounded in a historical and internationalist scientific analysis and above all a political party and leadership that fought for such a perspective.

He identified US militarism as the key factor in world politics and dealt with the lies told by the Bush administration to justify its illegal occupation of Iraq. Referring to the latest referendum in Iraq, he said: "Elections conducted under the guns of the US military in Iraq have no more validity than the sham exercises in 'democracy' conducted by the British colonial authorities in India and Ceylon in the early part of the twentieth century."

Symonds explained that the US aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan was not a sign of strength but of weakness, and provided details on the social inequality in the US and the political crisis surrounding the Bush administration. He pointed out that the war in Iraq had been a turning point in world politics. Millions of people around the world had taken part in protests against the impending invasion in February and March 2003 but their views found no expression within the political establishment of any country.

Commenting on the Indian sub-continent, the speaker noted that governments and parties of all political complexions had dumped any anti-imperialist rhetoric. None of the major parties in Sri Lanka opposed the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. "The UNP, the SLFP and the JVP are all calculating how they can use the fraud of the global war on terror to enlist the support of the US closer to home," he said.

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towards war is the international working class. The ICFI is seeking to develop a global counteroffensive by the working class against imperialism and the predatory activities of global capital."

Explaining that the struggle for socialism would not develop spontaneously, Symonds said a relentless political and theoretical struggle against capitalism and all its defenders was needed. That was what the ICFI and its sections were carrying out on a daily basis through the WSWS. He concluded his speech by appealing to the audience to join the ranks of the SEP and ICFI and to fight for its political program.

Wije Dias opened his speech by emphasising the centrality of internationalism to the SEP's program. He said the difference between the SEP and other so-called left candidates boiled down to this. Without internationalism, their talk of socialism was just talk. Socialism was internationalist and could only be realised by the world working class.

Elaborating on the political situation in Sri Lanka, Dias said: "The crisis of the Sri Lankan ruling class has intensified to a serious degree. People are alienated from the two main ruling parties. That is why the elites are turning to repressive measures and this is symbolised by the fact that this election is being held under a state of emergency."

Dias pointed out that the ruling class parties traditionally made false promises at election time but that the long lists of lies in this campaign were without precedent. He noted that the recent budget handed down by the ruling SLFP-led coalition failed to even include the promises made by its candidate. While not providing for the poor and the unemployed, he said, the budget kept Rajapakse's pledge to the wealthy by removing the duty on imported cars.

Dias noted that the ruling elites throughout the region confronted similar crises stemming from the growing hostility of ordinary working people to their market reform agenda. "Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, speaking just before leaving for the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) conference declared, borrowing a term from the Bush administration, that all the countries neighbouring India had become 'failed states'."

Dias pointed to the crisis fermenting in India itself: "Last week External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh was compelled to resign his portfolio. He tried to live in the past—the India of the non-aligned and Cold War period—but powerful sections of the Indian ruling elite want strong connections with the US and so Singh was something of an obstacle."

Dias said the living conditions of the masses throughout the region were being slashed to pave the way for international investment. Concessions and subsidies to farmers were being cut, he said. Welfare programs were being reduced and private profit allowed to penetrate areas such as education and health. There was a constant pressure to force down living standards, facilitated by free trade agreements such as those being negotiated through SAARC.

"The only viable perspective for the working class is to fight for international socialism. There is a long tradition of Trotskyism in South Asia. The Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) as a section of the Fourth International advanced a socialist perspective for the working class throughout the region, including India, Sri Lanka, Burma and Malaya, to fight British colonialism and its local lackeys. In opposition to this, the British and the local ruling elite carved up the region into the artificial states of India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka and created a communal and religious cauldron.

"The SEP advances its perspective to unite workers across ethnic, communal, religious, caste and gender differences. Our perspective is for a Federation of South Asian Socialist republics which would include a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic," Dias said. Socialism could not be built nationally, he said, pointing to the collapse of Soviet Union, which was run by the Stalinist bureaucracy on the basis of the reactionary theory of socialism in a single country.

Dias explained that the SEP called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the north and east of island as the first step toward ending the war. The party also called for the convening of a genuine constitutional assembly to draw up a new constitution to establish basic democratic rights for all. Such a program had to be fought for by mobilising and uniting Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers independently of all factions of the ruling class on a socialist basis.

In the limited discussion time, two questions were asked: how was the SEP going to campaign against the suppression of its political meeting in Jaffna, and secondly, what was the purpose of the slogan for the United Socialist States of South Asia.

Answering the first, Dias said whoever was responsible for the thuggery that led to the cancellation of the SEP's Jaffna meeting, it was a sign of weakness. Tamil workers and youth had lost faith in the Colombo government and its various allies a long time ago and were losing faith in the LTTE. Driven to look for an alternative, working people in Jaffna would find ways to discuss and fight for the SEP's perspective.

Commenting on the second question, Symonds pointed out that the ICFI was not fighting for a series of regional programs—the United Socialist States of Europe and of South Asia—but rather that these were completely subordinate to the program of world socialist revolution. Within that context, workers in South Asia shared problems with common historical roots in the carve up of the British Empire in the region to create a series of artificial and communally-based states. Overcoming these divisions was an essential part of the struggle to unite workers throughout the region as part of the global struggle against capitalism.

The audience responded strongly to an appeal for donations to the SEP election fund, contributing 11,300 rupees, and several people remained for further discussion. See accompanying interviews.

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