

Threats of violence against SEP meeting in Jaffna, Sri Lanka

The Socialist Equality Party
5 November 2005

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was unable to hold a planned presidential election campaign meeting in Jaffna last Sunday because of threats of violence that were aimed at preventing the local population from hearing the party's policies.

The meeting was to be held on October 30 at 2.30 p.m. at the Cooperative Union Auditorium to discuss the SEP's political perspective and program for the November 17 poll. So far, the SEP has been the only party standing a candidate in the election to organise a meeting in Jaffna, in the war-torn north of the island.

Prior to the meeting, a notice was put up on the hall's closed doors declaring: "Boycott the current presidential elections in Sri Lanka. There is no room for the Tamils to support any of the presidential candidates in Sri Lanka. The experience of the past period is enough for us. Do not indulge in any activity propagating the presidential elections."

In an unmistakeable threat, both to the SEP and to anyone attending the meeting, the notice continued: "This is a warning. If such activity is undertaken by anyone not heeding our instruction the Makkal Padai [People's Army] will give a fitting answer." Makkal Padai is clearly a bogus name, which was used to obscure the real identity of the perpetrators.

On the day of the meeting, two young men went to the caretaker's house and warned him not to open the hall. Then, as the people who had arrived to attend the meeting were gathering outside the venue, two men wearing helmets with visors covering their faces approached the crowd. They wheeled round on a motor bike, then left, shouting out: "[I]f you proceed to hold the meeting we will lob a grenade into the hall."

Given the history of violent provocation in Jaffna, the SEP reluctantly decided to call the meeting off. The town has been at the heart of the country's 20-year

civil war and it is heavily militarised. Security forces subject the local Tamil population to an oppressive regime of arbitrary controls and checks. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is also active in the town. It controls parts of the Jaffna peninsula and is notorious for its use of violence against political opponents.

It is quite possible that the LTTE, or one of its front organisations, was responsible for this attack on democratic rights. The pro-LTTE Students Association of Higher Educational Institutions issued a statement on October 26 calling for a boycott and denouncing in racist terms all the candidates as "Sinhala".

In 1998, the LTTE arrested four SEP members in Wanni for campaigning for the party's program. In 2002, the LTTE issued death threats and harassed SEP members who formed and led a fishermen's cooperative union at Ampihainagar in Kayts Island.

Such thuggery could also be the work of one of the armed Tamil organisations, such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), that collaborate closely with the armed forces. The EPDP, which is part of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA), has threatened and harassed SEP members previously for campaigning against the army's methods. In 2000, an EPDP parliamentarian physically attacked SEP members in Kayts.

Both the LTTE and its opponents are mired in communal politics and deeply hostile to the perspective of the SEP, which seeks to unite all working people—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—on the basis of a socialist program. Clearly the purpose of the Makkal Padai threats was to prevent any discussion of the SEP's politics, including its class perspective for ending the civil war.

After 20 years of war, and a ceasefire since 2002 that

has resolved nothing, many ordinary Tamil people are looking for an alternative. Neither the United National Party (UNP) nor the Sri Lankan Freedom Party—the two major bourgeois parties—has any solution to the war or to growing social inequality. The anti-democratic methods of the LTTE are also arousing deepening hostility—along with its failure to address the basic social needs of working people.

Whoever was responsible was obviously concerned that the SEP's campaign was having a significant political impact. The party had put up hundreds of posters, leaflets and literature in Tamil, and campaigned house-to-house in Kayts, Karaitivu islands and Karainagar, as well as in Jaffna town. Several well-attended local SEP meetings were held, and local newspapers reported the details of the main meeting which was to be addressed by SEP Central Committee member Nanda Wickremasinghe.

Sixty people turned up at the hall before the scheduled time. These included fishermen, professional workers from the Ceynor factory, housewives and young girls. Four people had travelled from the LTTE-held Wanni area to attend. They were all disgusted and angry at what happened.

SEP member Somasundaram explained to the crowd: “We are being compelled to stop this meeting because of a cowardly threat by reactionary forces who dread any serious political discussion of the issues that confront working people. This threat is a gross violation of democratic rights.

“Surely the time has come for the working people of the North and the East to discuss the bitter experiences of more than two decades of civil war. Now it is becoming clear that the so-called peace process that started with the ceasefire agreement of 2002 is a trap for working people, especially the Tamils. Neither the UNP government, that brought about this agreement with the help of the international powers, nor the present UFPA government have changed anything for the benefit of the ordinary masses. The oppressing armies of Colombo still remain in the North and East.

“If anything has been proved by the past experiences, it is that the LTTE policy of seeking the patronage of the predatory international powers is totally bankrupt.” The speaker thanked everyone there for attending and asked them to actively support the campaign for the SEP's presidential candidate Wije Dias.

Some felt that the LTTE were responsible. Several asked the SEP members: “Why is this party, that calls for the withdrawal of the Sri Lankan armed forces from the Tamil areas, being prevented from having a public meeting?”

The SEP, along with its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, is the only party that has consistently opposed the war since 1983. Its candidate Wije Dias has been campaigning in the presidential election for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan security forces from the North and East.

At the same time, the SEP insists that the LTTE offers no way out for working people. Rather, it represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie. Since 2002, it has been seeking to reach a power-sharing arrangement with the various Colombo governments for the mutual exploitation of the working class.

The SEP campaigns for all workers, whatever their ethnicity, language or religion, to unite and fight for the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for socialism throughout the Indian subcontinent and internationally.

We call on young people, workers and intellectuals throughout the island to condemn the attack on the party's democratic right to publicly discuss its perspective and policies, and to support our campaign in the November 17 election.



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