

SEP public lecture in Colombo: new SLFP-UNP coalition to expand civil war

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a public lecture in Colombo on November 14 to discuss the political implications for the working class of the unprecedented coalition between the two major establishment parties—the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition United National Party (UNP)—and the escalating civil war in Sri Lanka.

More than 100 people attended despite torrential rain and tough security measures imposed by the government following the killing of Tamil parliamentarian Nadaraja Raviraj on November 10. The audience included workers, youth, students, intellectuals and housewives—both Sinhalese and Tamil. The lecture was delivered in Sinhala and translated into Tamil.

In his opening remarks, the meeting chairman K. Ratnayake, a member of the SEP political committee, said the SLFP-UNP was a sign of serious political crisis produced by the return to civil war.

“Since coming to power last November, President Mahinda Rajapakse, for all his posturing as ‘a man of peace’, has violated every tenet of the 2002 ceasefire agreement signed with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by launching a series of military offensives,” he said.

“The UNP and SLFP, which have been bitter rivals for over 50 years, have now joined forces to prosecute this war and to impose the corporate agenda of market reforms. Inevitably it will be working people—Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim—who will be forced to bear the brunt of these reforms that benefit the wealthy few.”

The main speaker, SEP general secretary Wije Dias, who is a member of the WSWs International Editorial Board, began by reminding the audience of the terrible consequences of one year of President Rajapakse’s rule—a rising toll of misery from the war, deteriorating living standards and a renewed onslaught on the basic democratic rights of working people.

Since last December, Dias explained: “More than 3,500 men, women and children have been killed and over 200,000 have become refugees in temporary camps that lack basic sanitary conditions. Nearly 600,000 Tamils on the northern Jaffna peninsula are under military siege and face acute food shortages. Several thousand people have risked their lives to flee in small boats to Tamil Nadu in southern India.”

Dias stressed that these combined figures meant that during the past 11 months alone more than 10 percent of the total population in the north and east provinces had been affected by the war.

The lecturer explained that a myth was being cultivated that the SLFP-UNP coalition would end the war, citing economic analyst

Dinesh Weerakkody who wrote in the local *Financial Times*: “There is hope for this agreement to succeed because the continuing deterioration of the economy has necessitated it, and it seems we are fast heading for disaster in the north and east.”

Dias pointed out that the UNP had not opposed Rajapakse’s return to war over the past year. The UNP was the party that began the war in 1983 and its turn to peace talks with the LTTE in 2002 reflected the needs of the business elite in Colombo.

“The peace talks arranged between the UNP government and the LTTE under the sponsorship of the major powers was never organised out of concern for the plight of ordinary people facing the devastation of the war. It was only a mechanism to pressurise the LTTE to submit to the dictates of the Colombo government and stabilise the capitalist rule on the island to fatten their profits. In the ‘global war on terrorism’ declared by the Bush administration, they saw a welcome opportunity to pursue this agenda,” he said.

Rajapakse assumed the presidency last year, with the support of the chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU). He allowed the military to conduct a provocative covert war against the LTTE, and then ordered open military offensives against the LTTE in July. The political and media establishment in Colombo embraced this policy of war, hoping for an easy victory after the security forces gained a few initial successes.

Dias cited the *Sunday Times*, which previously backed the peace process. In a major article entitled “Microscope on Mahinda Era,” the newspaper insisted that the military offensives against the LTTE “must be commended”. It continued: “Colombo has to take a lot of flak from the international and donor community, not because it is responsible for these events but because the Rajapakse government seems strangely inept at prosecuting the propaganda war against the Tigers.” Offering his advice, the columnist declared: “Countering this would require pressuring the Tigers diplomatically as well as militarily.”

The speaker traced the various efforts made by the major powers in the past to urge a grand alliance of the two parties for a negotiated end to the war, beginning with those of British Foreign Secretary Liam Fox in 1997. No peace settlement was reached but successive governments imposed the economic restructuring agenda demanded by foreign investors leading to a deepening social crisis for working people. Mired in Sinhala supremacism, the SLFP and UNP had only one response: to whip up anti-Tamil

chauvinism to divide the working class. Far from being a sign of peace, the new coalition represented a shift toward an intensification of the war.

Dias quoted from a Federation of Chambers of Commerce of Sri Lanka statement, which declared: "Partisan politics and the power play between the major parties have forced successive leaders to ignore unpopular, yet critical, reforms." He said the "reforms" demanded by international and local investors would inevitably place further burdens on the working people.

Dias also warned of the government's increasingly anti-democratic measures. "Rajapakse, with the tacit approval of the UNP, has already begun to blatantly violate the constitution and the international human rights agreements that Sri Lanka has signed." The government had failed to establish independent police and electoral commissions as required under the 17th amendment of the constitution. It had in effect imposed press censorship on the military's operations and threatened action against artists and filmmakers whose works were antiwar.

The speaker traced out the history of the two parties. The SLFP was founded in 1951 in a calculated move by its leader S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike to derail and disorientate mass working class opposition to the UNP. Bandaranaike combined Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism with socialist demagoguery and positioned his party as an alternative to the right-wing UNP. The SLFP's program was never socialist, but was based on national economic regulation, which had been undermined by the globalisation of production of the past two decades.

There had been no essential programmatic difference between the two parties for some time. "Now the ruling elite has decided to end the luxury of having two bourgeois parties and to join forces to wage class war against the working people and youth of all communities, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslims. This is a sign, not of their strength, but of their weakness in the face of the utter alienation of the urban as well as the rural masses from both parties," Dias said.

"Both Rajapakse and Wickremasinghe have placed their bets on the support of the Bush administration to help carry forward their common war policy and the attacks on the social and democratic rights of working people throughout the island. But, at the recently held mid-term elections in US, the American working class and youth have delivered an unmistakable blow against the Bush administration's aggressive colonialism and anti-democratic attacks at home.

"What the working class in US, Sri Lanka and all around the world require to achieve their aspirations for democracy and social equality is an international socialist perspective to replace the global capitalist system with a world socialist federation. Our fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam is an integral part of this world perspective on which the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* is based," Dias said.

The lecture was followed by questions and answers and an appeal for support for the campaign being waged by the SEP and the WSWs to demand Sri Lankan authorities catch and punish the killers of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas. He was shot dead at his home in the eastern rural town of Mullipothana on

August 7. The most likely suspects are the security forces or associated Tamil paramilitaries. Many of those at the lecture signed the SEP's petition.

In response to a question on the SEP's policies to end the war, Dias explained: "More than anything else the program to solve the problem must be a viable one. The tragic experiences of the post-war system of nation-states established in South Asia and in the Indian sub-continent in particular show indisputably the impossibility of realising democratic freedom through the establishment and maintenance of large or small capitalist nation states. This vindicates the historical validity of our program, first elaborated by the Trotskyist BLPI (Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India) in the 1940s, for a socialist republic of the Indian sub-continent, including Sri Lanka and Burma.

"This is why we oppose the LTTE's program of national separatism. Our political fight is for the unity of the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working people and the poor to engage in an independent struggle against capitalist rule and for the establishment of a workers and peasant government. The immediate first step on this path must be the demand by the working class for the unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan military from the north and east," he said.

Following the formal end to the meeting, there was animated discussion with SEP members. Prasanna, a young man from the port city of Trincomalee in the east, was born only a year after the war started in 1983. He told the WSWs why he had attended the meeting.

"For my whole life I have been through the destruction brought about by war. What we want most is an end to this war, a decent job and the low cost of living. But all the left parties are doing nothing. We thought that this SLFP-UNP alliance would stop the war. But the topic of your lecture conveys a different idea. It was a shock to me and inspired me to participate in this lecture. Furthermore, the name of your party means social equality. I hate all the old left parties, including the JVP, that raise no voice against social conditions and war. I am searching for a new party."

An administrative officer explained: "As a reader of the WSWs, I know that the SEP is always looking at the political issues from the standpoint of the working class. I know that the joining of the SLFP and UNP is unprecedented. Although I sense the move to be dangerous, I didn't have a concrete idea about this danger. There is no other organisation that is able to present a concrete and scientific analysis like the SEP. That is why I came along with another of my staff mates."



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