

SEP holds May Day meeting in Colombo

Our correspondents
8 May 2007

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) held its May Day rally in Colombo on May 1 to mark the international workers day. About 200 people attended, including, workers, students and youth from Colombo, and surrounding suburbs as well as from Chilaw in northwestern province, Ambalangoda in southern province, Kandy in central province and Hatton and Bandarawela in the island's central plantation districts.

Many other parties bowed to a call by President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government to respect May 1 as a Buddhist religious holiday—the monthly Wesak full moon day. The ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) along with the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the so-called left parties—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party (CP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—dutifully complied and held their rallies on April 30. All are deeply imbued with Sinhala-Buddhist communalism.

SEP political committee member K. Ratnayake chaired the meeting, welcomed those in attendance and extended fraternal greetings to other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). He pointed out that SEP members in northern Jaffna peninsula were unable to participate due to the return to civil war by the government over the past year.

“Today we are holding our May Day meeting under conditions of deep crisis of world capitalism and where US and other imperialist powers are again plunging mankind toward world war.” He said the May Day meeting was part of the international struggle of the ICFI to provide leadership and perspective to the working class to fight against imperialist war and social inequality.

Ratnayake read greetings from SEP member Chandrasekaran in Jaffna, who stated: “I believe that our meeting will be a blow against the [government's] racist war. We are engaged in a difficult struggle to find the whereabouts of SEP member Wimalaswaran and his friend Mathivathanan who have disappeared like hundreds of others ...

“Although the war has engulfed us, it has failed to stunt our thinking. We have been trained to transform society, not

to adapt to it. War can be ended by uniting the working class across national, language and religious lines and rallying the intellectuals and youths around the working class.”

Kapila Fernando, a member of the steering committee of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the SEP's student organisation, said the main victims of war were the younger generation—the sons and daughters of workers and the oppressed. He quoted at length from the statement launching the ISSE, explaining that students and young people around the world faced a common struggle against war and oppression. Fernando explained that the war in Sri Lanka arose from the decades of anti-Tamil discrimination exploited by successive Colombo governments to divide the working class.

Political committee member Nanda Wickramasinghe pointed out that the US invasion and occupation in Iraq had produced a deep crisis for the Bush administration. It had failed to achieve its objectives in Iraq, creating bitter conflicts within the American political establishment over how to end the debacle. Noting the mass opposition to the war in the US and internationally, Wickramasinghe stated: “No section of the American ruling elite represents mass opinion and they all work against it.... That situation reflects the vast gap between interests of ordinary masses and interests of ruling elite.”

Political committee member Vilani Peiris explained that 60 years after formal independence, US imperialism was extending its grip on the Indian sub-continent. All the regimes in the region were in deep crisis, she said, due to growing mass opposition. Peiris described the situation in Pakistan, where broad layers of people opposed military ruler Pervez Musharraf's support for the so-called “war on terrorism,” his anti-democratic methods and the country's deepening social inequality. “What is lacking in this mass movement is an independent political perspective,” she said.

M. Thevarajah, another member of the SEP political committee, pointed out that all the pretexts used by the Bush administration to justify its invasion of Iraq—weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein's alleged links with Al Qaeda—had been exposed as lies. The widespread opposition to the war was reflected in last November's mid-

term elections for the US Congress. What was needed was a joint struggle by workers and young people internationally to put an end to the profit system, which was the source of war.

Wije Dias, SEP general secretary and WSWs International Editorial Board member, gave the main address to the meeting. “We are proud to be holding a May Day meeting today under conditions where an attempt has been made to force working people and youth in Sri Lanka to observe *sil* [Buddhist religious rules] by holding May Day rallies yesterday.”

Dias said the subordination of May Day to a Buddhist religious holiday was a subversion of the basic principles on which May Day was founded—socialist internationalism. “This religious fundamentalist reaction has emerged in Sri Lanka, the Indian subcontinent and around the world under conditions where the class struggle is reemerging worldwide.”

The ICFI had analysed that with the globalisation of production, the class struggle would become international not only in essence but also in form, Dias explained. This was evident in worldwide protests against the Iraq war in February 2003 and the current simultaneous strike actions by auto workers in Europe. Racism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism were utilised by reactionary forces to divide the working class and must be opposed by workers.

Dias noted that middle class radical outfits such as Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which acceded to the Rajapakse’s call to shift May Day, always hailed the granting of a holiday on May 1 as a great victory for the working class.

“When May 1 was declared a holiday by the government of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1957, the working class [in Sri Lanka] had already established a 30-year political tradition of holding May Day rallies... By hailing the holiday, the ‘left’ parties were subjugating the working class to Bandaranaikeism. By May Day in 1958, Bandaranaike had brought down the Public Security Ordinance to crush working class struggles.”

Referring to Rajapakse’s May Day speech the previous day, Dias warned that the president’s references to “the abolition of political differences within the working class” and “determination to build a country without any political differences” expressed a move toward dictatorial methods of rule. Amid the country’s deepening civil war, the government could not tolerate any opposition.

The speaker pointed out that the Bush administration exploited the “war on terror” to justify its military adventures. “President Rajapakse is using same worn out pretext to intensify the civil war in Sri Lanka,” he said. An estimated 4,000 people had died in the renewed war and

some 300,000 others had been displaced over the past year.

Dias dismissed Rajapakse’s latest “political solution” to the war by forming district councils as a throwback to a similar plan implemented by President J.R. Jayawardena and his right-wing United National Party (UNP) government. “This is not a program for ending the war but a justification for continuing the war. This is a move to provoke the LTTE. It will be utilised by the major powers to justify the war by branding the LTTE as an inflexible organisation.”

Dias reviewed the lessons of the betrayal of Trotskyism by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) through its entry into the capitalist government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1964. The abandonment of socialist internationalism led to the political domination of organisations based on Sinhala communalism—like the JVP—and Tamil separatism—like the LTTE—among radicalised youth in the 1960s and 1970s. The political consequences were the eruption of civil war a decade later.

After the triumphalism over the “death of socialism” following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, imperialism today was confronted with a deep economic and political crisis. “This is the period of a new generation. Someone who was born in 1991 is a 16-year-old youth today. This new generation will come forward in a very determined way against the drive to imperialist war and deepening social inequality. In launching the ISSE, the ICFI is aiming to prepare this generation politically for this struggle.”

At the conclusion of the meeting, a resolution was passed demanding the Rajapakse government conduct an immediate investigation into the disappearance of SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan on the Jaffna peninsula. The chairman raised a collection for the SEP’s fund and the meeting concluded with the singing of *The Internationale*.



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