

# SEP holds public meeting in Colombo to oppose the war in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents

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About 100 workers, youths and professionals attended a public meeting held by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Colombo on November 13 to discuss a socialist program to oppose the country's renewed war. Over the past two years, the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has plunged the island back into communal conflict, steadily intensifying offensive operations against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

SEP general secretary Wije Dias delivered the main report. Other speakers included Kapila Fernando, ISSE steering committee convener in Sri Lanka and K.B. Mavikumbura, an SEP central committee member and president of the Central Bank Employees Union (CBEU).

SEP political committee member K. Ratnayake chaired. He opened the meeting by pointing to the serious political changes taking place in Sri Lanka and internationally. He quoted from the SEP presidential election manifesto in November 2005, which had predicted that Rajapakse, if elected, would return the country to civil war.

Ratnayake explained that since Rajapakse assumed power, the renewed war had claimed at least 5,000 lives, military spending had shot up by 267 percent and inflation was soaring. Sections of the working class were entering struggles to defend their rights and living standards, but to do so they needed a socialist program to oppose the government and its war, he said.

Placing these developments in their international context, he warned that the Bush administration's preparations for war against Iran, following the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, threatened to lead to broader conflicts.

SEP political committee member **Vilani Peiris** examined in detail the political crisis in Pakistan and Washington's support for the dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf. She pointed to the duplicitous role of Benazir Bhutto, leader of the Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP), in seeking a US-brokered deal with Musharraf while posturing as an opponent of the junta. Peiris warned that the support in sections of the Colombo political and media establishment for the Pakistani military regime was an ominous sign of what was being prepared in Sri Lanka.

**K.B. Mavikumbura** explained that working people were being thrown into intolerable conditions. "During our campaign for this meeting, a mother of three explained she was increasingly facing difficulty providing meals and education for her children. This is common. Life for ordinary people is getting miserable. The

government is diverting money for the war. When workers demand wage increases, they are branded as supporters of the LTTE in order to suppress their legitimate struggles.

"We presented a resolution in the CBEU calling on workers to unite on socialist policies to end the war. We pointed out that the campaign for the withdrawal of the military from the north-east, which is under de facto military rule, is a necessary condition to unite workers. The union affiliated to the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) immediately branded us 'Sinhala Tigers'. In communal language, this means a traitor who should be eliminated. The government and communal groups are using this label to intimidate struggling workers and suppress opponents.

"Recently I attended a trade union meeting to organise a picket in support of teachers. The government had said it could not increase the salaries of teachers as it had to pay for the war. It took out an order in the Supreme Court to intimidate teachers. I explained that workers should take up a political fight against the government. The central question is to oppose the war, but the trade unions leaders rejected that. Instead they said workers should form an alliance with the opposition United National Party (UNP), which is notorious for attacking workers' rights. Workers need to build an independent political movement based on a socialist perspective."

**Kapila Fernando** explained how the war has affected young people and students. "Only 15 percent of students who are eligible to enter university can get admission each year. About 19 percent of youth in the age group of 15 to 29 are unemployed. When the budget was presented for 2007, a year ago, the president promised 10,000 jobs for graduates, but only a handful got jobs. Now another 5,000 unemployed graduates have joined the job queues and the president is promising 15,000 jobs. When students recently staged protests in Colombo, the police unleashed a brutal attack on them. The education ministry has admitted that it has no money to print the required number of text books for school children."

Kapila referred to ongoing student protests at Sabaragamuwa University for better facilities. "The education minister admitted that the treasury has cut 20 percent from the budget allocation for higher education for this year due to financial problems. But the JVP-affiliated Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) leaders insist there is no connection between the huge expenditures on the war and the slashing of education. The victims of the 25-year war are young people, including students, many of whom have no alternative but to join the army."

**Wije Dias** began the main report to the meeting by declaring: “World capitalism has reached an impasse, similar to the conditions that existed prior to the First World War. The capitalist ruling class internationally has nothing to offer billions of people other than devastating wars for the colonial re-subjugation of the world.” He pointed to the growing turn to internal military repression in many countries and the predatory military adventures by the imperialist powers, above all by the Bush administration.

Turning to the war in Sri Lanka, Dias said working people were presented with two false alternatives by the ruling elite. The first was a never-ending war to annihilate the LTTE, not unlike the Bush administration’s phony “war on terrorism”. “This is the line taken by President Rajapakse. He reiterated his position while handing down the budget this month, saying that his program to defend the motherland would not be surrendered before any challenge. This is a direct threat to the working people and youth fighting for their legitimate social rights,” Dias said.

Dias referred to reports in the media noting that Rajapakse had tried to orchestrate a “military success” to coincide with his budget speech on November 7. But the military adventure in Muhamalai ended up in a debacle, costing the lives of scores of soldiers and injuring nearly 150. “This single episode confirms that the war is a matter of survival for this government and for capitalist rule as a whole—which has completely failed to provide basic needs such as food, jobs, education, health care and agricultural subsidies for working people, youth, students and farmers,” he said.

The speaker then turned to the second option—an internationally-sponsored “peace process”—which is often peddled by sections of the political establishment and their “left” hangers-on as the alternative to civil war. The same imperialist powers that sponsor the Sri Lankan peace process have backed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have not objected to the government’s military offensives launched over the past two years. Farcically, Rajapakse continues to announce that he is for a negotiated settlement, even as he prosecutes his brutal war.

“To place any hopes on this peace process is not only naïve but dangerous,” Dias warned. Its purpose, he explained, was to block any independent political intervention by the working class to end the war. One of the main roles in hoodwinking workers about the role of the “peace process” was played by various middle class radical groups and parties such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP).

Dias referred to the NSSP’s response to the military’s recent assassination of the LTTE’s political wing leader Thamilchelvan. In his statement, NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratna enthusiastically declared: “Not only the [pro-LTTE] TNA, but also the great poet, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, has accepted that the death of Thamilchelvan is a loss for all Tamil people. This shows that this death has taken the Tamil liberation struggle to a wider circle.”

Dias explained that Tamils had been led into a dead-end by the separatist program of the LTTE, which had constantly looked for support from sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie in southern India. The “great poet” hailed by Karunaratna was none other than Muthuvel Karunanidhi, whose DMK [Dravida Munnetra

Kazhagam] was part of the Indian government that had not raised a murmur of opposition to the Rajapakse government’s military offensives against the Tamil population in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

The speaker said the NSSP was opposed to a turn by Tamil people to a working class solution to their democratic and social problems. Instead the party encouraged the dangerous illusion that the Tamil workers and poor should rely on sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka and India. On this basis, the NSSP encouraged a communal settlement between the Colombo government and the LTTE.

Dias explained that, in the South, the NSSP promoted the view that Sinhala workers should rely on bourgeois Sinhala parties. The NSSP denounced a vote for the latest war budget by the Rajapakse government as “a massive crime”. But it then called on all trade unions to form a broad front to defeat the budget. This was a call to line up with the right-wing United National Party that started the war in 1983.

“As we said on the very day that Rajapakse was narrowly elected as president, we again stress that the defence of the democratic rights and living conditions of the masses that are being trampled on cannot be achieved without opposing the war, based on an independent political program aimed at initiating a struggle against the capitalist system itself.”

Dias said that to end the war, the essential first step was to demand the withdrawal of troops from the north and east. This demand, raised by the working class in the south, would galvanise an alliance between working people in the south and north in a struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government. This was the meaning of the SEP’s call for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a socialist federation of South Asia and internationally.



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