

SEP/ISSE holds May Day meeting in Colombo

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) marked international workers' day with a strong meeting at Colombo's New Town Hall on May 1. Around 200 people including workers, young people, students and professionals from Colombo attended, along with others from southern and northwestern provinces and the island's central plantation districts.

SEP Political Committee member, K. Ratnayake, who chaired the meeting, explained that May Day was being held this year as world capitalism was mired in a deepening economic crisis and workers around the world were suffering its consequences. He warned that the working class was now entering a period of sudden shocks, abrupt changes and sharp shifts in the political situation.

Ratnayake pointed out that the Colombo press had blacked out all coverage of the SEP's May Day rally while reporting on all other rallies. "It is not an accident," he said. "Only our movement opposes the renewed war [in Sri Lanka], calls for the withdrawal of troops from the North and the East and advances the perspective of socialist revolution."

Vilani Peiris focused her remarks on the growing political crisis across South Asia and on the destabilising impact of US imperialism. She referred in particular to the political shifts and turmoil in Pakistan, Nepal and India and to the attempts by the Bush administration to block plans by India and Pakistan to build a joint gas pipeline from Iran. Peiris also noted that the US has not accepted the recent Maoist election victory in Nepal and was seeking to establish a government that would protect its interests in a region that was strategically located between India and China and also adjacent to energy-rich central Asia.

M. Thevarajah spoke of the conditions facing Tamil plantation workers and the growing anger at the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and other trade unions that also function as political parties. He explained that the CWC was holding its rally in Hatton under conditions of a huge army and police presence to suppress any opposition. "This underscores how far the CWC has betrayed the working

class through its integration into the government of President Rajapakse."

Thevarajah emphasised the necessity for Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers to unite and advance a class solution to the war. He explained that the purpose of the SEP's call for the withdrawal of troops from the North and East was to create the political basis for unifying the working class. The SEP did not support the program of the LTTE for a separate Tamil statelet, saying that the democratic rights of Tamil people could only be secured by overthrowing capitalist rule and establishing a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of the broader struggle for socialism internationally.

ISSE convener Kapila Fernando outlined the devastating impact of the war and the deepening social crisis on young people and students. He said the majority of the 70,000 people killed in more than two decades of civil war had been young people. The economic burdens of the war have been imposed on youth through the slashing of public services and rising prices.

"Through the emergence of private universities, education has become a profit-making business," he said. Although the student population in eight major universities has increased from 24,000 in 1984 to 60,000 in 2006, there has been no significant improvement in facilities and infrastructure. Only 18 percent of eligible students gain university admission. "The unemployment rate among youth in Sri Lanka is over 20 percent," he said. "Their only option is to join the military and become cannon fodder for the war."

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias delivered the main report to the meeting. He began by saying: "We must grasp the very root causes for the political and social crisis, which has extended on a world scale." He explained that Leon Trotsky had made the rise of the US as the dominant imperialist power in the 1920s and 1930s central to his analysis of this tumultuous period.

Dias quoted Trotsky's explanation of the sharp inter-imperialist tensions: "In the period of crisis the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly, and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom. The

United States will seek to overcome and extricate herself from her difficulties and maladies primarily at the expense of Europe, regardless of whether this occurs in Asia, Canada, South America, Australia, or Europe itself, or whether this takes place peacefully or through war.”

Dias went on to examine the consequences of the decline of the US. He noted that the period of the post-war boom under American economic, political and military hegemony had ended in a sharp crisis in the 1960s that produced struggles of the working class internationally. Capitalism was only able to survive with the assistance of the Social Democratic and Stalinist leaderships, supported by Pabloite revisionism.

“The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was the only organisation that fought for the political independence of the working class in these struggles,” Dias explained. “The Revolutionary Communist League—the forerunner to the SEP—was founded in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in this period of political turmoil.”

Dias said the decay of US hegemony over the past three decades was preparing a new period of revolutionary upheaval. “The crisis of US imperialism is already producing serious political instabilities and shocks around the globe today.”

Turning to the war in Sri Lanka, the speaker explained that the lies told by Rajapakse to win the 2005 presidential election were being graphically exposed. “His Mahinda Chintanaya [election manifesto] promised to bring ‘an honourable peace’ to the country. It further promised to present ‘a political solution’ within three months through an all-party conference. He also promised to present that solution to LTTE leader Prabhakaran and to discuss it with him,” he said.

Dias declared: “Rajapakse cheated the people with those lies. Only the SEP exposed those lies right at the very beginning. We warned that Rajapakse would escalate war once he won the office.”

Pointing to the developing crisis throughout South Asia, Dias concluded by explaining the necessity for an international socialist program. “The objective conditions for transforming the SEPs into mass parties have developed on a global scale. The perspective on which that task must be based is presented daily on the *World Socialist Web Site* to workers and young people internationally.”

The meeting concluded by an appeal for the SEP fund that raised more than 18,000 rupees and the singing of the Internationale.

The WSWS interviewed several of those in attendance.

Ivan, an employee at the Petroleum Corporation, said: “I was formerly a sympathiser of the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi

Peramuna]. But now I understand that problems facing Sri Lankan workers and ordinary masses, especially the war, cannot be solved through its nationalist program. The JVP’s recent split has made it clear that it is an unprincipled outfit. I read your analysis on that split. The JVP was not able to get the participation of the members of union branches for its May Day rally this year, as it did in former years.

“I listened to all the speakers here attentively. All of them attempted to explain that the present political crisis in Sri Lanka is an expression of the world crisis of capitalism. It is important for us to think about the political crisis in the Indian sub-continent. Workers have been solely confined to the problems at our own work places by the parties like JVP.”

Chamara, a design student from the University of Moratuwa, said: “This is the first time I participated in your May Day meeting. I came here because I follow a course related to the field of art, and the Marxist movement has a clear independent standpoint on art, according to the literature of yours that I have read.

“I would like to state a fact about your stand on the war and rising prices of essentials in Sri Lanka and internationally. These two phenomena are international problems and so those who base their solutions on nationalist calculations cannot even begin to solve them.

“If I speak about the environment in the universities in Sri Lanka right now, it can only be explained as anti-intellectual. Students enrolled come there, do their subjects and leave. There are no opportunities for discussion on political, social and cultural problems. University lecturers also do not go beyond their own subject areas. I feel that this should change.”



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