

Sri Lankan SEP stands in provincial elections to oppose war and attacks on democratic rights

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka is contesting two provincial council elections to be held on February 14. The party will stand two lists of 19 candidates—one in Nuwara Eliya district in the Central Province and the other in Puttalam district in the North Western Province.

Nuwara Eliya is in the centre of the island's vast tea plantations in the central hill districts where the poorly-paid and oppressed workforce is overwhelmingly Tamil-speaking. Puttalam district on the west coast has a mixed population of Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils—including many people displaced from other areas by the country's bitter 25-year civil war.

The SEP's candidates include plantation workers, fishermen, farmers, teachers, unemployed youth, students and housewives. In Nuwara Eliya, the list is being headed by Myilvaganam Thevarajah, 55, who has been a full-time party organiser for more than two decades. In Puttalam, Nihal Geekiyanage, 52, a longstanding party member, will lead the campaign.

In opposition to all other political parties, the SEP candidates will emphatically oppose the war being waged by President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East.

This is not a war of liberation or a war against terrorism, but a war to entrench the power and privileges of the Sinhala ruling elite over the working class as a whole—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike. The SEP calls on all workers to decisively reject the divisive poison of communal politics and to unify in a struggle for their common class interests on the basis of a socialist program.

The election is taking place amid a wave of triumphalism in the Colombo political establishment following the army's capture of the LTTE's administrative headquarters in Kilinochchi. Rajapakse has declared that this "a victory for the entire nation" and hailed the troops for making the dream of "peace, freedom and democracy" a reality.

The SEP warns the working class: this is neither your war nor your "victory". The war that erupted in 1983 was the product of decades of anti-Tamil chauvinism whipped up to divide workers and entrench a social base for bourgeois rule. For two and a half decades, successive governments have continued to prosecute the war, imposing its full burden on the backs of working people.

If the army succeeds in driving the LTTE out of its remaining strongholds, it will only strengthen the hand of Rajapakse and the politico-military cabal on which he rests. Far from inaugurating a new period of peace and democracy, such a "victory" will lead to the further trampling of democratic rights and the militarisation of every aspect of society. In anticipation of "peace", far from downsizing, the army has been authorised to boost its numbers by 50 percent to 200,000.

Over the past two years, as Rajapakse tore up the 2002 ceasefire and plunged the country back into war, the government has unleashed a reign of terror to intimidate and suppress opposition. Hundreds of people have disappeared or been murdered by military-sponsored death squads. The media, protesting workers and farmers—even the Supreme Court—have been threatened with violence for "undermining national security". Parliament has been reduced to a hollow shell. The island is ruled by the largest cabinet in the world, but the real decisions are taken by the bureaucrats and generals who have the ear of the presidential clique.

The sharpest warning should be drawn from events in the week since the "Kilinochchi victory". On January 6, thugs armed with automatic weapons and grenades ransacked the offices, studios and control room of the MTV/Sirasa network after a government-directed campaign denouncing its coverage as "unpatriotic". On January 8, gunmen shot dead in broad daylight Lasantha Wickramatunga, the editor of the *Sunday Leader*, which has been critical of the government's conduct of the war.

The government and the army will not hesitate to turn on the working class. Like tens of millions throughout Asia and the rest of the world, Sri Lankan workers confront the bleak prospect of losing their jobs and a devastating decline in their living standards, amid the worst crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s. Exports

of garments, tea and other commodities are already contracting sharply. The impact of the global turmoil has been compounded by huge expenditures on the military, which have trebled from 69 billion rupees in 2006 to 200 billion rupees in 2008.

Throughout the past three years, the government has demanded working people sacrifice for the war. Whenever workers raised demands for a pay rise, the unemployed for jobs, peasants and fishermen for subsidies, or the poor for social benefits, the ready reply of Rajapakse has been that there is no money. Yet when it came to the wanton destruction of human lives and resources there has been no limit!

Following the fall of Kilinochchi, Rajapakse declared: "Our motherland wants you to have this commitment and patience for a little while longer." But the reality is that his calls to sacrifice for the motherland will not stop if the army manages to suppress the LTTE. The government has no solution to the economic crisis but to intensify its assault on working people. And the methods employed to fight the war—communalism, thuggery and police state repression—will be used to suppress the opposition of workers fighting to defend their jobs, conditions and living standards.

None of the opposition parties offers any alternative. The right-wing United National Party (UNP), the chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and, with the exception of the open representatives of the LTTE, all the parties of the Tamil and Muslim minorities, have joined the military triumphalism. The UNP has ditched its call for peace talks, now claiming that its 2002 ceasefire with the LTTE was a clever ruse that allowed the military to prepare for the present war. For its part, the JVP is claiming credit for pushing Rajapakse to relaunch the war in 2006.

In opposition to this disgusting wave of chauvinism, the SEP's candidates will be advancing a class solution to the war and the economic crisis based on the principles of socialist internationalism. Workers in Sri Lanka share the same problems, concerns and aspirations as their class brothers and sisters throughout South Asia and internationally—and in many cases, are exploited by the same transnational corporations.

The war in Sri Lanka is just the sharpest example of the incapacity of the capitalist class throughout the region to resolve the most basic democratic and national tasks. For decades, religious, ethnic and language differences have been exploited to divide the working class and buttress bourgeois rule, creating a disaster for tens of millions of ordinary people. Once again, India and Pakistan are beating the drums of war in the wake of the Mumbai atrocity. By taking a stand against ethnic and religious communalism and militarism, workers in Sri Lanka will show the road forward for the working class throughout South Asia.

In calling for the withdrawal of troops from the North and East of the island, the SEP gives no political support to the LTTE. Its program of Tamil separatism is the opposite side of the communal coin to the government's Sinhala supremacism. The LTTE, which

represents the interests of sections of the Tamil elite, is organically incapable of making an appeal to the working class—the only social force capable of ending the war and ensuring the democratic rights of the Tamil population.

The war has served to expose those such as the middle class radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) who claimed that the international "peace process" offered a solution. For the US and other imperialist sponsors, the peace talks were only ever a tactic to ensure the war did not encroach on their economic and strategic interests in the region. They all tacitly supported the Sri Lankan military's renewed offensives in 2006 and maintained a pointed silence when Rajapakse formally broke the 2002 ceasefire last year. The US has now openly declared that it no longer supports the resumption of peace talks with the LTTE.

A genuine political struggle against war must be linked with the fight for a workers' and farmers' government based on a socialist program. The SEP candidates will campaign for socialist measures to address the social crisis confronting workers, farmers and youth. It is impossible, however, to resolve the problems confronting the working class within the confines of one small island. Throughout the world, working people are confronting economic recession and the looming dangers of trade conflict and war. That is why the SEP will advance the fight for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a broader union of socialist republics of South Asia and the world.

The SEP is aiming to reach the widest possible audience in the course of this election campaign. We therefore call on all those who support our program to actively participate by donating to the party's fund, attending our public meetings, helping disseminate our campaign literature, and, above all, applying to join the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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