Sri Lanka: SEP and ISSE hold meeting in Colombo to launch election campaign

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka held a public meeting in Colombo on January 8 to launch the party's campaign in two provincial council elections on February 14. The SEP is standing a list of 19 candidates each for the districts of Nuwara Eliya in Central Province and Puttalam in North-Western Province. A cross-section of workers, young people, students and professionals attended.

Chairing the meeting, K. Ratnayake, a member of the SEP Political Committee, noted that President Mahinda Rajapakse had called the council elections before their terms were completed. "The government hopes to win the two councils by utilising its state power and all the public resources in its hands and by exploiting the political confusion created by racist war it re-started, in order to claim a popular mandate to crack down on working people and the oppressed masses," he said.

Ratnayake explained that more than two decades of civil war in Sri Lanka had reached a turning point with the military's capture of Kilinochchi, the administrative headquarters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). He drew a comparison with Israel's ongoing genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza, warning that victory over the LTTE would not end the attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

M. Thevarajah, an SEP Political Committee member, heads the party's list for Nuwara Eliya district. Speaking in Tamil, he began by recalling that the SEP had been the only party to warn during the 2005 presidential elections that Rajapakse would resume the war and attack democratic rights. The government's claim that the war was to liberate Tamils was exposed by the military occupation imposed in the East after LTTE strongholds were captured.

"I am standing as an SEP candidate in the Nuwara Eliya district. A majority of Tamil-speaking plantation workers there live in appalling conditions. The Ceylon Workers Congress and the Upcountry People's Front are partners of the government. The breakdown of the international tea market has affected workers—some estate managers are even trying to pay workers with processed tea leaves!"

Thevarajah concluded by explaining: "This is not our war. Against the government's communal division of workers, we fight for the unity of the workers across ethnic lines. Our call for the withdrawal of troops from the North and East is the first condition for the unity of workers to fight for socialism and an end the war. In fighting for this program, we oppose the LTTE's perspective of a separate Tamil capitalist statelet. The SEP fights for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as a part of a broader Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia."

ISSE convenor Kapila Fernando, a candidate for the Puttalam district, pointed out that 25 years of civil war had had a destructive impact on every aspect of the lives of young people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike. "Military spending has increased immensely over the years. Accordingly, expenditure on education as well as other social services has been slashed. Facilities for students and universities and schools are deteriorating," he said.

Fernando continued: "The ILO youth unemployment figure for Sri Lanka is 22.4 percent. As the world economic crisis impacts on Sri Lanka, the very limited opportunities for youth will be closed altogether. Already young workers are facing job cuts. The only avenue left open by the government is to join the military. Thousands of youth have been used as cannon fodder in the war and have been killed or maimed in recent months. This is an indictment of 60 years of rule by Sri Lanka's bourgeoisie."

SEP Political Committee member Vilani Peiris spoke about the hardships facing the working class and throughout the region as a result of the war and the deepening global economic crisis. She noted in particular the harassment of fishermen in the Puttalam district by the Sri Lankan and Indian navies. Peiris explained that there was no national solution for the working class in any country and that workers had to unite their struggles across national boundaries around their common class interests.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias delivered the main report

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to the meeting. "While we are running candidates for two districts in the provincial council elections, the aim of the SEP election campaign is to present and discuss a socialist program to resolve the burning social and economic problems of the working class, youth and oppressed masses not only in Sri Lanka but also in the Indian sub-continent and internationally," he explained.

Referring to Rajapakse's cynical claim that his war would bring peace and prosperity, Dias warned that behind the hailing of "war victories," an anti-democratic and reactionary program was being prepared against the working class. He pointed out that armed thugs had ransacked the MTV/Sirasa station two days before. On the day of the meeting, Lasantha Wickramatunge, the editor of the *Sunday Leader*, had been shot dead in broad daylight.

"MTV and Wickramatunge are not friends of the working class, but sections of the capitalist ruling class," Dias said. "They only had tactical differences with Rajapakse government on how to conduct the war and suppress the working class. . . If Rajapakse government treats Wickramatunge and MTV in this way, how will it treat its real class enemy—the working class?"

Dias said the working class must make serious political preparations to deal with the dangerous situation arising from Rajapakse government's brutal measures. He insisted that it was necessary for the working class to establish its political independence from all factions of the ruling elite, and that required demarcating from the various middle class left demagogues.

He explained that the leaders of Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP) were now fostering illusions in the various opposition parties, including the right-wing United National Party (UNP), all of which fully support the war. The NSSP and USP, both of which have a long history of opportunist alliances with bourgeois parties, were bitterly opposed to the independent intervention of the working class into the political arena, he said.

Challenging the government's triumphalism over the capture of Kilinochchi, Dias asked: "Whose victory is this? Not of the working class and the oppressed masses." He reviewed the origins of the war, saying: "Open warfare started in 1983, following the Black July pogrom against Tamils. But the war was the result of the racialist program of the Sinhala-dominated Colombo elites carried out against Tamils for decades.

"When UNP President J.R. Jayawardene started the war in 1983, he was seeking to suppress the struggle of the working class against the impact of his moves to integrate the country into the global economy. Only the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, emphasised the class basis of the war and opposed it, insisting this war was not our war and declaring, ‘not a single cent nor a man for the war'."

Dias pointed out that Rajapakse's hailing of the capture of Kilinochchi as "a major victory in the world's battle against terrorism" had a broader significance. "It means that Sri Lanka is going to be increasingly linked into the devastation of imperialist war," he said. The government's support for the US "war on terrorism" was support for the reactionary wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and also Gaza.

With growing political crises in South Asia, the US was paying increased attention to Sri Lanka. Dias referred to the historical precedent when British imperialism turned the island into its military base in the region as its colonial rule was confronted with the powerful anti-colonial Quit India movement in 1942.

Dias concluded by pointing to the growing demonstrations of workers and youth against the US-backed war by Israel in Gaza. "These forces must be united on the strategy of world socialist revolution. This can be done only by a movement which has a historically tested and vindicated perspective and program—the International Committee of the Fourth International." He called on workers and youth to actively participate in the SEP's election campaign and to join the party.

The SEP announced its campaign in a statement published on January 10: "Sri Lankan SEP stands in provincial elections to oppose war and attacks on democratic rights"

The SEP will hold a series of meetings as part of its election campaign.

Hatton
January 17 at 2 p.m.
Venue: Center for Social Concerns (CSC) Hall, Hatton

Chilaw
January 19 at 4 p.m.
Venue: Shirley Corea Hall, Chilaw

Puttalam
January 26 at 3 p.m.
Venue: Puttalam Town Hall, Puttalam

Hatton
February 10 at 2 p.m.
Venue: Shakthi Hall, Hatton

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