SEP holds election meeting in Sri Lankan plantation district

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka held the first public meeting of its provincial election campaign at Hatton on January 17. Workers, young people and housewives listened attentively to the SEP candidates.

The party is fielding 19 candidates in the Nuwara Eliya district of the Central Province for the February 14 elections. Hatton is a small town in the central highlands, Sri Lanka's main tea plantation area, where the majority of the population are plantation workers, mostly Tamils.

The SEP is also running another 19 candidates in the Puttalam district of the North-Western Province.

Alagappan Shantha Kumar, one of the SEP candidates for Nuwara Eliya, chaired the meeting. He said plantation workers were so disgusted by the treachery of the main political parties that they looked at any candidate with suspicion. "In our campaigns they start listening only when SEP members explain our independent political perspective for the working class," he added.

Shantha Kumar spoke about an army and police search operation carried out on January 16 at Dunkeld tea estate, a few kilometres from Hatton. Similar operations were carried out across the area before a meeting to be addressed by President Mahinda Rajapakse at nearby Norwood town on January 25.

"While the war is going on in the north and east against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam [LTTE], the offensive is being used to suppress the democratic rights of working people in the south. In particular, Tamil-speaking plantation workers are regarded with suspicion, their rooms are searched, and many youth have been taken to custody, accused of being ‘LTTE terrorists' or suspects."

Shantha Kumar pointed out that five leaders of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) were members of the Rajapakse cabinet. They included CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman and UPF leader Periyasamy Chandrasekaran. Both organisations had served in successive governments for decades.

"Their infamous claim is that workers can only gain by supporting the government," Shantha Kumar said. "But workers' conditions have not in any way improved. What they are doing is preventing workers' struggles and helping the government and plantation companies. Workers need to build the SEP as an alternative organisation of their own, based on international socialism."

Panini Wijesiriwardena, an SEP candidate and political committee member, drew out the implications of the economic breakdown that was engulfing every corner of the globe. "It is the deepest crisis since the Great Depression in 1930," he said. Governments in the US and other countries were putting forward bailout programs for the rich, alongside retrenchments benefit cuts for workers.

Wijesiriwardena said imperialist countries were seeking to resolve the crisis at the expense of workers and through the destruction of productive capacity, closing down factories and firms. At the same time, the US was resorting to military power, invading and occupying Afghanistan and Iraq and unfolding a neo-colonial policy to dominate the world economy. This would only lead to destructive wars and world war. The economic and social crisis in Sri Lanka was driven by this world situation, Wijesiriwardena added.

Another SEP candidate, plantation worker S. Savarimuttu, said he had joined the SEP more than a decade earlier, having discovered its political principles and program through bitter experience. He referred to the successful campaign of the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the SEP, to release several plantation youth, including himself, after they were detained by the police on bogus accusations of being LTTE suspects in 1995.

Savarimuttu said the conditions of estate workers had not changed much since British rule. Most workers still lived in tiny line rooms and were paid meagre daily wages. In 1948, just after independence, the first Sri Lankan government, led by the United National Party (UNP), abolished the Tamil-speaking estate workers' citizenship rights. It was the beginning of the ruling elite's drive to divide workers by provoking anti-Tamil communalism. Although later governments were forced to grant citizenship rights,

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these workers were still treated as second-class.

Initially, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), then a Trotskyist party, fought against these attacks. But the LSSP entered a capitalist coalition government with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964. In the plantation districts, the CWC was able to exploit this treachery. Savarimuttu emphasised that this situation could be changed only by fighting for socialism.

Myilvaganam Thevarajah, an SEP political committee member who heads the party slate in Nuwara Eliya, was the main speaker. He began by explaining the economic impact of the world financial crisis and the reactionary civil war, and warned of a deepening assault on working people.

Thevarajah quoted Lalith Obeysekere, chairman of the employers' Plantation Services Group, who had complained that the wages of Sri Lankan plantation workers were too high and their productivity too low compared to Kenya, India and Vietnam.

"In fact," Thevarajah pointed out, "a worker in the plantations receives a maximum wage of not more than 280 rupees [$US2.50] per day. World Bank reports indicate that the current real wage of estate workers is less than the 1992 level. The level of poverty in the plantations is the highest in the country."

As the global downturn intensified, plantation companies were seeking to cut wages, increase production and retrench workers. By contrast, workers badly needed decent wages, housing, health care and job security.

Thevarajah stressed the need to draw the lessons of workers' struggles, referring to the December 2006 wages strike. Trade unions, including the CWC and UPF, arranged a backdoor deal with Rajapakse and betrayed the struggle for a pittance. The All Ceylon Estate Workers Union, controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), joined the betrayal, while making bogus criticisms.

The CWC and UPF were contesting the elections as part of the ruling alliance that was waging the war and attacking workers' living conditions and jobs, Thevarajah added. Workers had showed much militancy during the strike but that was not enough. Apart from the SEP, no political party contesting the election had a program to solve the burning problems of workers, farmers and youth.

Thevarajah issued a warning about the recent killing of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge by thugs on January 6, and the ransacking of MTV/ Sirasa and its radio channels by another gang. These thugs could not operate without the backing of the government and the security forces, he explained. The intensified attacks on the media marked preparations by the government to further stifle any opposition and criticism, and to take on the working class as it came forward to defend conditions.

"Without an independent political program against the government to end the war and unite Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim workers on socialist policies, the working class cannot defend jobs, wages and improve social conditions. The SEP has intervened in this election to discuss this program with workers, youth and other oppressed and intellectuals.

"The SEP opposes the war, demands the withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the north and east, and advances the perspective of bringing to power a workers' and peasants' government, that is, a socialist republic of Sri Lanka-Eelam, to implement a socialist program. This is a fight that can be advanced only by uniting with the working class in South Asia and internationally for socialism."

After the meeting, several audience members spoke to the WSWS, and many agreed to join an election committee to campaign for the SEP candidates.

Priyantha Kumara, a young bricklayer, said: "I agree that the socialist unity of the working class is the only way to change capitalist exploitation. We bricklayers build houses. But many of us don't have proper houses to live in. Nowadays many construction workers are finding it difficult to get employment in this country or abroad. The SEP has explained the international crisis. No other party tells the workers these truths."

Shantha, a Sinhalese woman, commented: "Workers are in a difficult situation. I work with the poorest scavenging labourers in the Hatton area. A lot of non-government organisations are working here in the name of solving problems. My long experience has shown that such programs are an illusion and diversion. Working people need your perspective."

John, a young worker, said: "I am attracted to your perspective of the international unity of workers for socialism. The evils that we experience—the war, the super-exploitation of the working class—seem to be perpetual. You are different from the backward politics of the opportunist politicians, many of whom are trade union leaders. All of them sell the workers out for their own gain. We can't trust these people."

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