The road forward for the working class of South Asia

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The campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the February 14 provincial elections in Sri Lanka has enormous political significance not only for the working class of that island, but throughout South Asia and internationally.

The SEP's campaign, based on the struggle for socialist internationalism, has been carried out in the teeth of the government's ruthless communal war in northern Sri Lanka and a ferocious campaign to whip up militarism and anti-Tamil chauvinism. Its program was directed against the rising tide of economic nationalism and protectionism emerging around the world in response to the profound crisis of global capitalism.

The SEP is the only party to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan military forces from the North and East of the island and to fight for the unity of all working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—against the government's sustained attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

The SEP's campaign has not been based on electoral manoeuvres or gimmicks, but oriented to the working class. Its candidates patiently explained to voters in the fishing villages of Puttalam and the tea estates of Nuwara Eliya that the working class had to rely on its own strength. Only by unifying and mobilising independently of all the parties of the bourgeoisie could workers win the rural masses to their side and open the road to a workers' and farmers' government based on socialist policies.

The SEP's campaign has been conducted amid a toxic political climate of communalism and repression. Anyone who opposes or criticises the government's war, even in a limited fashion, is branded a supporter of terrorism and a traitor to the nation. Thousands of people have been arbitrarily detained under draconian emergency powers and hundreds more have been murdered or "disappeared" by pro-government death squads.

Amid growing tensions across the region, the SEP's determined fight for internationalism is of particular importance for workers, young people and intellectuals throughout the Indian subcontinent. The protracted war in Sri Lanka is just one example of the communal and ethnic violence that has plagued the region for decades. Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have already fought three wars and frictions are once again rising dangerously in the wake of the Mumbai terrorist attacks. The whole region is a seething cauldron of religious, ethnic, caste and language divisions, mired in poverty and economic backwardness. This state of affairs stands as living proof of the basic tenet of Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution that the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development are organically incapable of meeting the democratic and social aspirations of ordinary working people.

All the apparently intractable conflicts that afflict South Asia can be traced to 1947-48 settlements imposed on the region by Britain, with the support of the local bourgeois elites, as a means of stifling the revolutionary wave of post-war, anti-colonial struggles. Having carved up the subcontinent into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, the British Colonial Office, in cahoots with the venal representatives of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie, reserved the island of Sri Lanka as a separate base of operations to defend British imperialism's interests in the region. These settlements, which artificially divided Punjabi, Bengali and Tamil peoples, immediately led to immense suffering. Millions lost their lives in the communal violence triggered by the India-Pakistan partition. In Sri Lanka, the first act of the newly independent government was to stir up anti-Tamil chauvinism by depriving a million Tamil-speaking plantation workers—one tenth of the population—of their citizenship rights.

In the subsequent six decades, the political wounds of 1947-48 have only festered and putrefied, giving rise to innumerable "national" struggles. All of them have followed a similar pattern to that of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has diverted the justified anger of the island's Tamils over decades of discrimination and pogroms into the struggle for a separate capitalist statelet. Within the framework of the Cold War, the LTTE initially took on socialistic and anti-imperialist colourations with an eye to support from the Soviet Union or China. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the LTTE openly appealed to the imperialist powers, promising to turn an independent Eelam into a cheap labour paradise for foreign investors. Its military collapse in recent months stems above all from the political bankruptcy of its nationalist perspective, which in the final analysis always depended on acquiring one or more sponsors among the major powers.

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In this context, the SEP's protracted fight for socialist internationalism throughout South Asia takes on an immediate relevance. Its program for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a United Socialist States of South Asia is not a utopian dream but a matter of practical necessity. How else is the enormous potential strength of the working class to be harnessed to combat the exploitation of giant transnationals and the predatory intrigues of imperialism? Throughout the region, all the parties based on a nationalist perspective, including the various Stalinist and Maoist formations, have openly embraced foreign investors and the capitalist market as a miracle cure-all and, in one way or another, supported US imperialism's neo-colonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The ability of the SEP to stand against the tidal wave of nationalism and political reaction that has swept South Asia stems from its protracted and courageous struggle for the principles of Marxism as embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against all forms of political opportunism. From its formation in 1968 as the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the party's young cadre had to deal with the immense political confusion generated by Lanka Sama Samaja Party's (LSSP) open abandonment of Trotskyist principles and its entry into the bourgeois government of Madam Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1964. Only the ICFI and the RCL plumbed this betrayal to its source in the virulent opportunist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that emerged after World War II and sought to liquidate the Fourth International. The Pabloite United Secretariat sanctioned the LSSP's years of political backsliding that were to culminate in the 1964 betrayal.

The RCL stood against the wave of petty bourgeois radicalism that flourished in the late 1960s and 1970s. It explained the political dangers of the contemporary infatuation with the "armed struggle" promoted both by the Sinhala populists of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil separatists of the LTTE and other armed Tamil outfits. The RCL's founding general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya wrote an extensive essay warning that the JVP's radical populism contained the seeds of the fascistic Sinhala extremism that were to be manifested in 1989 in the murderous rampage of its gunman against workers, trade unionists and socialists. Against those in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in Asia who exploited the LSSP's betrayal to proclaim the failure of Trotskyism, the RCL demonstrated that the LSSP's degeneration was not a product of the supposed flaws of Marxism, but its abandonment.

By defending Marxist principles, the RCL/SEP has earned bitter enmity across the spectrum of bourgeois politics. The party has faced state repression and political violence from all sides. During the JVP's armed adventure in 1971, the RCL opposed the Bandaranaike government's repression and was compelled to go underground. Two members were murdered by the security forces in jail. In the 1983 islandwide anti-Tamil pogrom that marked the start of the civil war, the party vigorously defended the democratic rights of Tamils. As a result, RCL members were arrested, and party leaders harassed and threatened by pro-government thugs. In 1989, the RCL opposed the JVP's reactionary patriotic campaign against the Indo-Lanka accord. Three party members were gunned down by the JVP's hit squads. In 1998, the LTTE detained three SEP members in Kilinochchi for weeks for the "crime" of campaigning for the SEP's socialist program and only released them after a concerned international campaign by the ICFI and WSWS.

The SEP has withstood these attacks and the immense political pressures of the national milieu in Sri Lanka because it functions, like all of the sections of the ICFI, as an integral component of our world party. The RCL was not founded as a national party, or as an independent national section of an international federation, but as a detachment of the international Trotskyist movement fighting for the program of world socialist revolution in Sri Lanka and South Asia. The advent of the *World Socialist Web Site* enabled the SEP to integrate its work on a daily basis with that of its sister parties around the world. Refuting those who claimed that the Internet could not reach impoverished workers in countries like Sri Lanka, the analysis of the SEP and ICFI now gets into the hands of workers and young people across the island and the region, in many, often ingenious, ways.

The significance of the SEP's election campaign does not reside in the number of votes its candidates will receive tomorrow. Those bedazzled by parliamentary triumphs should reflect on the tragedies that have resulted for the working class from the pursuit of opportunist electoral manoeuvres, not least of all in Sri Lanka. The strength of the SEP's campaign lies in the party's long and courageous struggle for principle and the clarity of its analysis and perspective. For anyone who has accompanied SEP members to a plantation, workplace or village, it is evident that the party's influence extends well beyond its relatively small, present numbers. Even its political opponents occasionally express a certain grudging admiration.

We encourage all our readers, particularly across South Asia, to carefully consider the perspective that the SEP has advanced in these elections. As global capitalism plunges into its worst crisis since the 1930s, the consequences for the working class will be devastating: mass unemployment, appalling economic hardship, rising international tensions, economic conflict and ultimately war. The choices are stark: socialism or barbarism. Those who want to fight for a socialist future should join and build the SEP in Sri Lanka, and the ICFI throughout the subcontinent, as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.

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