

Sri Lankan SEP campaigns in Puttalam

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11 February 2009

As part of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign for the February 14 provincial election, SEP candidates and supporters spent several days in the fishing villages of Thoduwawa and Iranawila in Puttalam district, north of Colombo. The party is standing a list of 19 candidates in this district and another 19 in the Nuwara Eliya district in Central Province.

Puttalam is one of the poorest districts in Sri Lanka, lacking basic facilities and services. Thoduwawa and Iranawila are only 65 kilometres from Colombo, but the journey takes more than three hours by government and private bus.

Water is a major issue, because there is no piped water. Some residents have wells dug on their land, but the water is of very poor quality. About 150 homes in north Thoduwawa have no drinking water on the property and people are forced to walk long distances to fetch it.

There is only one school in the area. Classes go up to the advanced level for university entrance, but only in arts subjects. Students pointed out to the SEP that the school was 14 teachers short at present. The Chilaw base hospital is 8 kilometres away, but for any serious illness patients have to travel far further.

The SEP is well known for its opposition to the government's communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Party members have a long history of fighting in the area in defence of the social needs of working people and opposing the discrimination and repression they face, particularly directed against the country's Tamil minority.

Nihal Geekiyanage, who heads the SEP's list of

candidates in Puttalam, lives in the area. His brother Greshan was one of three party members murdered in 1989 by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) assassination squads as part of their fascistic campaign against opponents of their pro-war policies. Hundreds of young people and local fishermen defied JVP threats to attend his funeral.

Among local fishermen, SEP campaigners found widespread suspicion and opposition to the claims of President Mahinda Rajapakse that the army's defeat of the LTTE would bring peace and prosperity. The war has not only brought heavy restrictions on their ability to fish but economic hardships produced by soaring inflation and the lack of services.

A fisherman speaking to the WSWs bluntly rejected the government's declarations and promises. "See what has happened in the East," he said. "The government declared that they had liberated the East. Now it is ruled by the Pillayan group [a notorious paramilitary outfit] with the support of the government. After the capture of the North the same will happen. There will not be democracy or peace for Tamil or Sinhala people.

"Before the war we went fishing in the North and East. The fishermen of those areas came to the south. We had close relations. Now we can't do that. Fishermen are harassed on the one side by the navy and on the other side by the LTTE."

His wife joined in, explaining that the price of essentials such as rice continued to rise. Samba rice, she said, was 50 rupees [40 US cents] a kilogram; last week it was 70 rupees and this week 75 rupees. She was angry that the government had cut its small welfare payments to many villagers, claiming that the families had enough income. That was just not true, she said.

"When an election nears, politicians promise to build an anchorage, which is badly needed for the area. When Chandrasena Wijesinghe of the JVP was fisheries minister he promised to build it. When we protested, President Rajapakse also made the same promise, but in vain. The opposition UNP [United National Party] did the same thing when they were in office. We don't believe any of those parties now."

Another fisherman, Jude, explained that the war had disrupted people's lives in many ways. "Before the war, many people from our area fished in the tanks [large dams] in the North and East. I fished in Kilinochchi in 1983. At that time, we lived with Tamil people as if we were all family members. I had a love affair with a Tamil girl. Language was not a problem for us. After the war began, we could not go there.

"I don't think the war will end because the problems of Tamil people cannot be solved in this manner. I don't like the way all Tamils are called 'Tigers' [LTTE]. They are also our people. Sinhala and Tamil youth are fighting each other. We do not want this war.

"Many injustices have happened to Tamil people. The government implemented Sinhala as the only state language and Buddhism as the state religion to divide people. Last year in our area there was a conflict between Buddhist and Catholic people. These things help only the rulers."

Anthony, 35, a fishing worker at Thoduwawa and married with three children, summed up his life: "I have been doing this job from my childhood, that is from about the age of 14. Now it is very difficult to earn enough money for my family. We have to stay at sea for three weeks to a month. If we can't catch enough fish we stay even longer.

"The boat owner first takes 10 percent of the sale [of the catch] for the boat, fishing gear and repair costs. Then he deducts the costs of oil, food, ice and the hire of vehicles to transport the fish. From the balance he takes half. What is left gets divided among the crew. There are five labourers on a big boat. Often we get less than 10,000 rupees [\$US88]—on rare occasions, 15,000

to 20,000 rupees a month. If there is no catch, we get nothing. That leaves us perpetually indebted to the *mudalali* [trader]. The next time we go fishing he takes the whole amount, mercilessly."

A boat skipper, Patrick, explained: "It is very difficult to fish under the present regulations. From January to April, the fish are close to shore. But they [the navy] don't allow big boats to fish these areas. Fishermen are also often arrested by the Indian navy for entering Indian waters. From last September to February, nearly 200 Sri Lankan fishermen were detained. Many have since been released. The government tells us to stay in international waters. But to do that, we need more fuel and we can't buy it with the present price of oil."

The wife of H. B. Rodni Fernando explained that her husband and four other fishermen were arrested by the Indian navy last September. She has two children but no income. Her brother was helping her but has lost his job. She and her children are living in a small thatched hut surviving as best they can.



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