

Sri Lankan election: SEP campaigns among railway workers

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As a part of its campaign for the Colombo district in the Western Provincial Council election, the Socialist Equality Party visited the quarters of railway workers in Ratmalana—a major industrial zone 15 kilometres south of Colombo city. The SEP is standing a slate of 46 candidates for the election on April 25.

The Ratmalana railway workshops were built in the 1930s during the last period of British colonial rule. Some living quarters for rail workers were built at that time but were later expanded to 500 houses. More than 2,000 people now live in the complex.

Ratmalana rail workers have a long history of militant struggle. They were part of the 1953 Hartal—general strike and business shutdown—led by the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) that brought the United National Party (UNP) government to verge of collapse. The LSSP, however, later betrayed the principles of Trotskyism by entering the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government in 1964.

The Ratmalana rail workers played a leading role in the 1976 general strike that brought down the ruling SLFP-led coalition. They were also part of the general strike movement that erupted in July 1980 against the impact on living standards of the free market agenda of the UNP government. Former President J.R. Jayawardene crushed the strike by sacking tens of thousands of striking public sector workers.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), have campaigned among Ratmalana rail workers since the RCL was formed in 1968. Many workers and their families in the area are familiar with the SEP and its protracted struggle for socialism.

Only a few workers were at home on Saturday during the SEP's campaign. Most are now compelled to work overtime or take part-time jobs outside the workshops to make ends meet. Most young people were also not at home, as many take extra tuition classes or work in temporary jobs over the weekend.

Just as the railway department has been run down, so too the living quarters of rail workers have suffered from neglect. Workers and housewives spoke angrily of the poor conditions of their homes.

Nimal Suwaris, a pump operator who has been working 29 years at the workshop, pointed to the deterioration: "See, there are cracks in walls. The floor has subsided. We have to put our furniture on wooden blocks. We have moved some pieces to homes of relatives. When it rains, the backyard turns into a river because the drainage system is blocked. Even sewerage from surrounding homes pours into the backyards."

Priyanta, a technician, said: "When we ask for repairs to our houses, the authorities say there is not enough money, no men to do work or no materials."

The houses are small. Children have grown up, now have their own families and have nowhere else to go. Despite the crowding, the residents are not permitted to extend their home even when land is available.

Mosquitoes and inadequate garbage collection create major health problems.

Ashoka Jayanthi, a housewife, blamed the Municipal Council: "Mosquitoes are a big problem for us. Health officials warn about the spread of dengue fever on the TV news. The government and the Municipal Council authorities blame people for not clearing their lands. But in this [housing] scheme, you can see there are water holes and unclean places that breed plenty of mosquitoes [and that the authorities have not removed]."

Like other working people, railway workers are unable to cope with the rising cost of living. Ariyaratne, a workshop mechanic with two children, explained: "It is very difficult to manage our monthly expenses with our income. After deductions for loans and other dues, we get only around 15,000-20,000 rupees (\$US131-175) per month. My wife does not have a job. Therefore everything has to be done with my monthly salary.

"Just for food we spend more than 10,000 rupees per month. We can't eat fish or meat as we used to in our young days. Sometimes you have to pay 80 rupees to buy 500 grams of the small, cheapest fish. Prices for vegetables all have gone up. We are compelled to limit the amount of milk for our children."

President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government are campaigning in the election by glorifying the army's victories over the separatist

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north of the island. There is a barrage of propaganda promising democracy and a prosperous future for working people after the "LTTE terrorists" are defeated. The plight of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians trapped by the fighting is being systematically covered up by the government and the military.

The SEP has been warning workers that the defeat of the LTTE will only bring a renewed onslaught on the democratic rights and living standards of workers throughout the island. Having brought the country to the brink of bankruptcy, the government is seeking a major IMF loan that will inevitably come with harsh austerity measures attached. The SEP is campaigning for the immediate, unconditional withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East of the island as a means of uniting working people in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies.

The government campaign has undoubtedly had an impact. After 25 years of devastating war, many people hope for an end to the conflict and some improvement in their lives. That hope, however, is mixed with considerable doubts and suspicions.

Weeraratna, a mechanic, began by telling us: "It is good if the war will end soon. There will be peace in the country. The money that [the government] spends on the war can be used for the country's development." But he began to listen, as we pointed to the deepening economic crisis produced by the huge military spending and the global recession. Considering the implications of the IMF loan, he nodded: "Yes, there is some truth in what you say."

L.S. De Soysa, an older worker, said: "The government says the war will end soon and people both in the North and East and in the South will live without fear. But I don't believe it. The war was created by the rulers of this country. The war may end if the LTTE is defeated, but there is no solution for the problems facing Tamil people.

"The present and previous governments are responsible for the war. I can remember what happened in 1983 [a genocidal pogrom on Tamils]. The killing of Tamil people and setting fire to their properties was done by UNP thugs but not by ordinary people."

De Soysa said none of the old leftist parties had any program to end the war and solve the problems of working people. He agreed that workers had to build a new socialist movement and asked for further literature.

In the 1970s, there were more than 5,000 workers at the Ratmalana workshop. Now, the number has been reduced to less than 3,000. Most retired workers have not been replaced by new recruits. Those recruited have no right to pensions or concessions on their electricity bills.

For the past two decades, railway workers have been battling plans to restructure the Railway Department as the first step toward privatisation and the loss of jobs, benefits, pay and promotions. They joined strikes by other public sector workers in 2006 and 2008 for better pay. Last year locomotive workers and drivers staged two

campaigns over working conditions. When the government denounced strikers as supporting the "LTTE terrorists," the union leaders caved in and called off the protests.

There are more than 100 unions in the Railway Department but workers have little faith in any of them. Many have quit the unions in disgust. Several said the unions had lost about 50 percent of their membership.

W.A. Jayalath declared: "The trade unions are completely useless. They do not defend our rights. There are two trade union fronts. One is led by unions supporting the government. The other is led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Many workers, including me, joined the JVP union as they claimed to fight for our rights. But now it is clear there is no difference between them and the pro-government unions."

Many of those to whom we spoke did not believe that the election would make any difference to their lives and expressed their disgust with all the establishment parties. Some said they simply would not vote.

K.G. Ranjith, a technician, said: "I do not trust any government or political party. I have not cast a vote in the past several elections. I don't believe that this election or any government that would come to office in the future will solve our problems. Instead, our problems will only get worse."

Speaking about the JVP, Ranjith explained: "Their politics were like opening up a soda bottle. For several years their party ballooned. Some people believed that the JVP would do something to ease their problems. Nothing happened and now it is like a deflated balloon."

He was critical of the government's attacks on democratic rights. "If you talk against the war you will be treated like a traitor. Then a white van will come and you will disappear. How many people have disappeared in the recent past?" He noted that power workers had been prevented by police from marching against privatisation.

Significantly, workers were keen to talk about history. Some knew about the past struggles of the working class in Sri Lanka but not in detail or how workers were betrayed. This interest is another sign that amid the disgust and alienation workers are beginning to consider a revolutionary alternative to the oppressive conditions they confront.



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