

# SEP media conference in Sri Lanka announces election campaign

Our correspondents  
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a media conference at Nippon Hotel on March 9 to announce its campaign for the Colombo district in Western Provincial Council elections to be held on April 25.

While the Colombo print media boycotted the event, journalists from various radio and television stations attended, including Siyatha/Real Radio, Sirasa TV, Deepam TV, Hiru FM radio and TV Lanka. The copies of the SEP's election announcement, published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on Monday, were distributed.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias chaired the press conference. Vilani Peiris, who heads the party's ticket of 46 candidates, was on the panel, along with candidates, Nanda Wickremasinghe and A. Shanthakumar.

Introducing the candidates, Dias explained that the SEP was the only party standing in the election that opposed the government's war, its attacks on democratic rights and deepening social inequality.

"In the little over three weeks since the previous election, the brutality of the anti-Tamil war in the north as well as its implications for the lives of working people and youth in the south have become even more evident. On the one hand, hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians, trapped in a tiny enclave on the north-east coast, have no food, shelter or medicine and are being indiscriminately bombarded. On the other, the government is crushing any struggle by workers, youth and students with the same ruthlessness," he said.

Dias pointed to two recent police crackdowns in Colombo. In the first case, police went on a rampage

against students at Kelaniya University after being called in following a clash between two student groups. In the second, 600 armed police were mobilised last week to block a protest by electricity workers against the privatisation of the electricity board.

Dias explained: "The working class confronts new political challenges. Under conditions of acute economic crisis, working people and youth will be forced to resort to class battles to defend their social conditions and democratic rights. But they need an independent political program and a revolutionary socialist party to guide them."

Vilani Peiris said the SEP was fighting for a socialist alternative in the election against all other parties. She focussed her remarks on the war, explaining that the SEP demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan troops from the North and East. At the same time, the SEP did not give any political support to the LTTE, but fought for a socialist perspective to unite Tamil and Sinhala workers against the Colombo government and the LTTE.

Peiris challenged the government's claim that its victory in provincial council elections last month demonstrated a popular mandate for its war. She pointed out that the ruling coalition faced no opposition from its rivals. The major opposition parties supported the war and the government's policies that placed the burden of the economic crisis on working people.

Peiris cited reports in the Sri Lankan and Indian media revealing top-level talks over a US-led military mission into northern Sri Lanka under the guise of evacuating trapped Tamil civilians. "The US intervention is not a humanitarian mission," she said, "but part of its plans to

boost its position on the island and throughout South Asia." The US, the EU and Japan have all backed the government's criminal war.

Turning to the economic crisis, Peiris said: "The government itself has admitted that the economy is facing serious problems. When the global crisis first became apparent in the US, the Sri Lankan government, particularly the Central Bank Governor Ajith Cabral, vehemently denied any possible effect on the Sri Lankan economy. Now Cabral himself has admitted that the country's foreign reserves have plunged and the trade deficit widened.

"The government is now involved in discussions to secure a loan of \$1.9 billion from the IMF. This is a huge loan, three times higher than the country's IMF quota. The government is pushing for this loan not to resolve the burning problems facing workers and the poor but to bail out cash-strapped businesses and prop up its own budget."

Peiris pointed out that the US government had spent \$750 billion over the past year to bail out the banks, which had not solved any of the problems confronting working people. It had just been reported that around 700,000 jobs were lost in the US in the month of February.

"The IMF is also providing a loan to Pakistan which has a long list of strings attached, including abolishing all welfare services and drastically reducing the budget deficit. Similar conditions will be imposed if the Sri Lankan government is given an IMF loan."

Peiris said the working class could only defend its interests based on a socialist program that sought to unite workers not just in Sri Lanka, but throughout South Asia and internationally. "Leon Trotsky pointed out in his Theory of Permanent Revolution in 1905 that the national bourgeoisie in countries with belated capitalist development were incapable of resolving any democratic tasks and that the working class must come forward to establish socialism and complete the democratic tasks, including the agrarian question and the national question.

"Today that program has been vindicated. India is in crisis. The national bourgeoisie has done nothing for the masses. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are also in crisis. Under these conditions, the working class must

mobilise independently and rally the peasantry to establish governments of workers and peasants. In Sri Lanka, the SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as a part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia. That is the only way to establish the rights of workers and the oppressed masses."

Peiris concluded: "The main aim of our election campaign is to present this program to working people in factories, plantations, fishing villages and rural areas as well as to unemployed youth, students and housewives. We want to initiate the broadest possible political discussion."

The media conference ended with a question about how the SEP intended to conduct its campaign. Dias explained that the SEP was addressing its campaign to workers and youth in Sri Lanka and throughout the region via the *World Socialist Web Site* and directly through campaigns among workers and youth in the Colombo district. He announced that the party would be holding a series of public meetings. The first major one would be at the Colombo Public Library Auditorium on March 24.

All the radio and television stations that attended broadcast excerpts from the press conference. The widely viewed Sirasa TV presented several minutes of video footage of Peiris, explaining the party's stand in opposition to all other parties. TV Lanka, Hiru FM and Siyatha/Real did the same. Deepam TV, a Tamil television channel, widely watched in Europe, US and Australia, included segments from the SEP media conference in its news bulletin telecast in Europe.



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