

Sri Lankan SEP stands in Colombo election against war and social inequality

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka will contest the Colombo District in the Western Provincial Council election scheduled for April 25. As in the Central and North Western provincial council elections held last month, its candidates will be the only ones fighting for a socialist program to end the government's communal war, attacks on democratic rights and social inequality.

The SEP is fielding 46 candidates including plantation and industrial workers, teachers, bank workers, fishermen, students, housewives and lawyers. Vilani Peiris, a member of the SEP Political Committee, will head the list. Peiris joined the SEP's forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), in 1969 at the age of 21, and has devoted her entire adult life to defending the interests of the working class through the struggle for socialism.

President Mahinda Rajapakse has called the election hoping to exploit the reactionary climate of triumphalism that is being whipped up in the wake of the army's advances against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Rajapakse claims that his party's win in last month's polls demonstrated that the voters supported the war. On the contrary, what it showed was that the government faced no challenge from the major opposition parties, which have fallen in behind its war.

The entire Colombo political and media establishment bears responsibility for the war crimes taking place in Mullivaithu district in the north. Indiscriminate shelling and bombing by the military has killed hundreds of Tamil civilians and injured thousands. Those fleeing the war zone are being herded into detention camps surrounded by barbed wire and security forces.

The SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East of the island. The purpose of this demand is not to back the LTTE, whose separatist program has proven to be a deadly political trap for the Tamil people, but to strength the unity of working people against their common class enemy—the Colombo government and the capitalist order that it defends.

The SEP warns that the army's victories over the LTTE will see a rapid intensification of attacks on working conditions, wages, jobs and essential services. President Rajapakse has mortgaged the state to pay for his war and is now begging for money amid the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s. Inevitably working people will be told that they have to "sacrifice for the nation", just as they have been forced to sacrifice for the war.

Foreign reserves have dwindled from \$US3.56 billion in July to \$1.75 billion in December—sufficient to cover just a month and a half of imports. Unable to borrow on the international credit market, the Central Bank has been forced to turn to the IMF, which on March 2 described Sri Lanka's precarious position as the "worst balance of payment crisis in a decade". Any IMF loan will come with strings attached, including demands for further privatisation and deep cuts to social spending.

The government is already using the language of militarism to describe the threat of social unrest. President Rajapakse told a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meeting on February 25: "In fact, the instability caused by this [global economic] crisis can be considered quite similar to the threat caused by terrorism to our societies."

Over the past two years, Rajapakse has repeatedly accused striking workers, along with protesting students and farmers, of being accomplices of the "Tiger terrorists"—i.e., of being economic saboteurs. Now, the vast security apparatus and battery of anti-democratic laws built up over 25 years of war is already being turned against the working class. On March 3, as the Central Bank and IMF were discussing the terms of a loan, the government was ramming long-delayed legislation through parliament to set the stage for electricity privatisation. The same day 600 police surrounded several hundred workers protesting against the law and threatened to invoke the wartime emergency powers if they tried to march on the Electricity Board headquarters.

University students have also become targets. On the pretext of ending violence on campus, the government has backed the closure of Kelaniya University and the arrest and charging of protesting students. Demanding the police be used to "flush out campus terrorists", the *Island* newspaper declared: "The North will be cleared of terrorism within days. And after the war is over in that part of the country, the government will have to go all out to liberate the seats of higher learning."

All the major parties have backed Rajapakse's "war on terrorism" and will do the same with his onslaught against the working class.

The United National Party (UNP) has now completely disowned the 2002 ceasefire and its subsequent peace talks with the LTTE. UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe has thrown his full support behind Rajapakse's resumption of war and, like Rajapakse, calls for a strengthening of the state to deal with other "terrorist" threats. The UNP's concern was never with the lives and aspirations of ordinary working people but with the impact of the war on business. It wanted a power sharing arrangement to open up the island as a cheap labour platform for foreign investors.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) backed the renewed war from the outset and has played a crucial role in sabotaging the struggles of the working class. For all their militant demagoguery, JVP union leaders have caved in whenever the government has insisted that the war effort take priority over the needs of workers. The JVP's opposition to electricity privatisation is based on the "patriotic" defence of national resources—the same reactionary economic nationalism being whipped up around the world to subordinate workers to the capitalist class and the nation state.

Workers and youth should reject the socialist pretensions of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP), which are also contesting the election. Both parties seek to subordinate the working class to the communal framework of official politics and the parties of the bourgeoisie. In this election, they are promoting the illusion, particularly among Sinhala working people, that the right-wing UNP can be pressured to call for a return to the defunct international peace talks.

Among Tamils, the NSSP and USP promote the LTTE's bogus claim to be "the sole representative of the Tamil people". In fact, the LTTE represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the working class. Its contempt for working people has been repeatedly demonstrated in its ruthless suppression of any political criticism, its program of forced recruitment and its current refusal to allow civilians to leave the northern war zone. Like the government's Sinhala

supremacism, the LTTE's Tamil separatism serves to tie working people to their own bourgeoisie and set them against their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka and around the world.

As for the peace talks, they were always a fraud. Like the UNP, the major and minor powers supported them as a means to an end—to conclude a war that was destabilising South Asia and threatening their interests. After the "peace process" broke down, the US, India and the rest of the "international community" backed its renewal, politically and militarily. With the LTTE on the brink of military collapse, they are now hovering around the island like vultures, determined to exploit the disaster to augment their own economic and strategic position in Sri Lanka and the region.

The Rajapakse government is using this provincial election to strengthen its hold on power in preparation for the class battles ahead. Workers and youth must make their own preparations by drawing the necessary political lessons from the past 25 years and advancing a socialist program to defend their own independent class interests. Most importantly, the working class must reject all forms of nationalism and communalism. The natural allies of the working class and oppressed masses in Sri Lanka are not the various rival factions of the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisie but workers throughout South Asia and internationally.

In the course of the election, the SEP's candidates will mount the broadest possible campaign among factory and office workers, the urban poor, students and young people for a workers' and farmers' government based on socialist policies. Our candidates will make clear that the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam is only possible as part of the broader political fight by the working class for a socialist federation of South Asia and the world.

We call on all those who support our program to actively participate in the SEP's campaign by donating to the party's fund, attending our public meetings, helping to distribute our campaign literature and by applying to join the Socialist Equality Party, Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Contact the SEP by telephone at 271-2104 (Sri Lanka) or by email at wswscmb@sltnet.lk.



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