SEP candidate addresses power workers in Sri Lanka

Our correspondents
21 March 2009

A meeting of power workers in Sri Lanka called to discuss legislation that sets the stage for privatisation has highlighted the political gulf between the Socialist Equality Party's perspective and that of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The "open dialogue" for Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers on Tuesday was convened by the JVP-affiliated Ceylon Electricity Workers Union (CEWU) and its umbrella organisation, the CEB United Trade Union Front (UTUF).

When the government's electricity bill was adopted in parliament on March 3, the UTUF and unions affiliated to the conservative opposition party, the United National Party (UNP) appealed to workers to call in sick and attend a protest. Every other union backed the law, falsely claiming jobs, pay and conditions were protected.

Well aware of continuing concern among power workers, the UTUF called this week's forum as a means of letting off steam. The meeting was advertised as an open dialogue between political parties and mass organisations, but only the SEP and JVP-led unions were represented.

SEP members handed out copies of the WSWS article, "Sri Lankan parliament passes power reform bill" as a leaflet. About 250 workers attended.

The main official speakers were UTUF president Ranjan Jayalal and K.D. Lal Kantha, president of JVP-aligned National Trade Union Centre (NTUC), who is also a JVP parliamentarian. While repeatedly declaring that the bill would pave the way for privatisation, neither provided any perspective for defending jobs and conditions.

Jayalal declared: "When the bill was tabled in parliament, the hearts of the people were chilled with the cool water of the war." In other words, the unions were unable to mobilise support because workers were swept up in the triumphalism whipped up by President Mahinda Rajapakse following the army's advances against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Lal Kantha also struck a pessimistic note, declaring: "When the bill was tabled in the parliament trade unions had been weakened. We have no strength in parliament or in provincial councils now." He went on to bombastically thunder: "What we can do is to come onto the streets and defeat the bill... We must defeat the bill and we can do it." He did not say how.

These attempts to posture as dogged fighters for workers are completely empty. The March 3 protest was relatively small because the union called a limited sick note campaign and workers have little confidence in the leadership. It was the JVP, which stridently defends Rajapakse's communal war, that poured cold water on workers. Jayalal himself told the media that the union had not called a strike out of concern that it would interfere with the war effort.

When the meeting's organisers called for debate, W.A. Sunil, an SEP candidate for the Western Provincial election and a WSWS journalist, stepped up to the microphone. He began noting that there was nothing to debate about the regressive impact of the legislation, both on power workers and electricity users. He insisted, however, that the speakers had ignored the main issue: how to fight privatisation, attacks on jobs and other rights.

"The government's actions to prevent the protest against the bill are a warning to CEB workers and other workers. At least 600 police were mobilised to surround the rally on March 3. When workers tried to march to the CEB head office, police threatened to arrest them. This government will not tolerate any opposition from the working class to its policies," he said.

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Sunil explained that the Rajapakse government was confronting a major economic crisis produced by the huge costs of the war and the deepening global slump. Major capitalist countries, including America and in Europe, were experiencing a collapse of banks and major industries. Millions of workers were losing their jobs. In China, 20 million migrant workers, and in India, a million, had been thrown out of work so far. Workers in the Sri Lankan garment industry and other sectors had faced the same fate.

Sunil continued: "The power workers' struggle is not isolated. The CEB and other workers can defend their jobs and other rights as part of an international struggle." He insisted that uniting workers meant opposing all forms of nationalism and communalism, and in Sri Lanka, that meant opposing the government's war and the anti-Tamil chauvinism that produced it.

"Jayalal and Lal Kantha in their speeches said the Rajapakse government is using war victories to anaesthetise workers and weaken the working class. Yes, the Rajapakse government has been using the war to attack the rights of the working class and divert their discontent. But the JVP must take political responsibility for this. The JVP helped bring Rajapakse to office, supported the war, and voted for the defence budget and the emergency regulations in parliament. In turn, the government uses the war and those emergency laws against workers."

At this stage, a handful of JVP supporters began to heckle, telling Sunil not to use the meeting as a political stage. The SEP candidate turned to the organisers and asked them whether this was indeed an open debate. With the vast majority of workers listening attentively, the chairman had no alternative but to allow Sunil to continue.

Sunil told the audience that the working class had a tradition of debating critical issues, no matter how bitter. He identified himself as the author of the WSWS article and asked if anyone want to object to the leaflet. No one took up his challenge.

Sunil explained the roots of the war: "The working class has to adopt a historical approach to every political question, including the war. This is not a war of the working class. The war is a result of discrimination against the Tamil people since 1948."

After tracing the way in which communalism had been used to divide the working class, the speaker said: "In 1983, the Sri Lankan ruling class began the war against the Tamil people in parallel with the implementation of free market reforms. Throughout the past 25 years of war in the north and east, the democratic rights and living standards of working people throughout the island have been attacked."

The SEP candidate said Rajapakse had broken all the promises he made in the 2005 presidential election campaign. After plunging the country back to war, he had used the war over the past year to systematically suppress the demands of public sector workers, teachers, unemployed graduates and farmers.

Sunil said workers had to oppose the war and the capitalist system that was the root cause of the conflict and the attacks on democratic rights and living standards. He said the working class must "demand the withdrawal of troops from the north and east to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers against the government. The CEB workers and the workers must come forward to build an independent political movement based on international socialism," he concluded.

The meeting was shut down soon after Sunil spoke. Jayalal and Lal Kantha did not try to answer his remarks. No JVP supporter from the audience stepped into the debate. In the past, the JVP has not hesitated to threaten and use physical violence against SEP members and supporters. Nor are their speakers ever short of empty militant demagogy. However, in the present situation, workers sense they need more than hot air. The attention shown at the meeting to the SEP candidate is an indication that sections of the working class are willing to consider a revolutionary socialist alternative.

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