

Sri Lankan SEP holds final election meeting

Sujeewa Amaranath
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) have held their final public meeting for today's Western Provincial Council elections. Scores of workers, students, youth, housewives and artists attended the meeting on April 21 at the Public Library auditorium in Colombo.

The SEP has presented a slate of 46 candidates for the Colombo district. In February, the party contested provincial elections in the Puttalam and the Nuwara Eliya districts of the Northwestern and Central Provinces respectively.

Before the meeting, SEP and ISSE supporters campaigned in several areas, including Wellawatte, Jinthupitiya and Kotahena in Colombo, where most residents are Tamils. SEP teams also campaigned among Tamil plantation workers in Avissawella and industrial workers in Ratmalana and Katuwana in Homagama. Thousands of leaflets were distributed, including the SEP election announcement and other WSWs statements on the world economic and political crisis.

Chairing the meeting, W.A. Sunil, an SEP political committee member and election candidate, explained the context of the meeting and the election. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has escalated the war in the North, causing hundreds of deaths among the tens of thousands of civilians trapped in the so-called no-fire zone in the Mullaithivu district.

Sunil warned: "While engaging in the war, the government and its various representatives tried to convince people that the world economic crisis was not felt by Sri Lanka. Now the country faces the drying up of foreign revenues... In a bid to obtain a \$US1.9 billion IMF loan, the government has already started implementing austerity measures and military-police state preparations to deal with inevitable social explosions."

The SEP's lead candidate, Vilani Peiris, began by referring to Rajapakse's emphasis on pursuing the war at any cost. "National television broadcast Rajapakse telling a gathering that he enthusiastically watched how people in the North were moving to the area controlled by the government. If a ruler can

be so determined to see the suffering of thousands of people, including men, women and children, some of whom were being killed by his own military's attacks, he can only be described as a representative of an utterly bankrupt order."

"The international powers are now in the process of proposing 'ceasefires', not out of any concern about the fate of this people. They are concerned for their interests in the region of South Asia, which could be endangered by the unrest developing in neighboring Tamil Nadu in India against the massive war crimes being committed against Tamils."

The speaker said the two main opposition parties, the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), backed the government and gave their enthusiastic approval for the catastrophe being created for Tamils.

Dealing with the so-called left parties, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), she said: "These parties say they oppose the war. But they are in fact appealing to the major powers to rejuvenate the so-called peace process. They are again trying to confuse workers by insisting that the solution for war can be found within the existing capitalist order. They are posing as socialists but defending the capitalist system."

Peiris explained: "The SEP bases its fight on Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution whose basic postulate is that the native bourgeoisie in countries of belated capitalist development cannot fulfill the tasks of the democratic revolution, including solving the national question and addressing social issues. These tasks have to be addressed by the working class taking power with the support of the poor peasantry."

The ISSE's Sri Lanka convener, Kapila Fernando, drew attention to the changes taking place in political consciousness among students and youth internationally. He cited a recent WSWs article, which discussed a survey finding that 33 percent of young adults in the United States expressed support for socialism.

“This indicates that great changes in consciousness are occurring among masses of people, with profound implications,” Fernando said. Referring to the experiences of the SEP-ISSE election campaign, he said: “Similar processes are taking place in Sri Lanka. Workers and youth in Sri Lanka have confusions due to the pressure of the war and communal propaganda. But they were ready to hear and consider the socialist perspective when we have discussed it with them.”

The main speaker, SEP general secretary Wije Dias, commenced by explaining that world capitalism was in a profound economic and political crisis. The major pillar of the international post-war order had been the strength of the American economy. Now, America had been transformed from the largest creditor to the biggest debtor nation, and its breakdown had far-reaching global social, political and economic implications.

Dias pointed to the impact on Sri Lanka. “The Sri Lankan economy has started to deteriorate speedily. According to the monthly figures for February, exports have fallen by 18.4 percent. Money sent by workers employed abroad declined by 3.8 percent. The tea industry contracted by 35.4 percent, while industrial exports declined by 13.4 percent.

“In the case of imports, they dropped by 37.3 percent. The main component of this decline was investment goods, which fell by 31.2 percent. These figures indicate a virtual breakdown of the Sri Lankan economy, including industry.”

Dias explained that the protracted war had been a product of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination which had been exploited by successive Sri Lankan governments to divide the working class. “Every discriminative measure of the ruling elite is directly related to the class struggle. The 1948 Citizenship Bill, which disenfranchised plantation Tamils, was a reaction to the 1946 and 1947 general strikes. The establishment of Sinhala as the state language in 1956 was the response to the 1953 Hartal, a broad protest movement in which working people and the oppressed united from North to South,” he said.

“The 1964 Sirima-Shastree Pact, signed between then prime ministers of Sri Lanka and India to forcibly repatriate hundreds of thousands of plantation workers to India, was the reaction of the ruling elites to the 1963 ‘21 demands movement’ of the working class. In response to the youth uprising of 1971, the then coalition government of Madam Bandaranaike established Buddhism as state religion in the 1972 constitution. Finally, this discrimination was elevated to a war in response to 1980 general strike, in which hundred of thousands lost their jobs.”

Dias pointed out that the LTTE’s separatist program had deepened the communal divide. “The perspective of a separate Tamil state is the other side of the coin of the Sinhala chauvinism of the Colombo elite. The aim of both is to prevent Sinhala and Tamil working people and the oppressed from uniting in a common struggle against capitalist rule. Against this standpoint, the SEP fights for the class unity of Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking workers.”

The speaker explained that the communal divisions stemmed from the artificial character of the nation states established in the late 1940s in the political settlements between British imperialism and the local ruling elites. “These states were formed against the will of the region’s masses and to abort the socialist revolution. The Trotskyists fought in the 1940s to establish a union of socialist republics of South Asia, including not only India and Sri Lanka but also Burma.

“As a continuation of that courageous fight, today we are fighting for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as a part of a union of socialist republics of the Indian sub-continent. As a precondition for this, we call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all state forces from the North and East of Sri Lanka.”

After the meeting, SEP and ISSE members held discussions with members of the audience. Thishan, a 30-year-old unemployed worker, said: “I think the Mahinda Rajapakse regime is taking steps toward a military dictatorship. Despite that, people will inevitably come forward to fight against collapsing living conditions, privatisation and unemployment. There is no alternative from the opposition UNP and JVP. Against this backdrop, your party’s intervention in this election with an independent program for the working class is very important. I respect to your courage.”

A Sri Lanka Telecom engineer commented: “I am a Tamil and born in the North. I was searching for a program to end the war. Yesterday I came here to listen to the speeches of Wickramabahu Karunaratne’s allies [the NSSP]. They say they are fighting for the rights of Tamils but no one presented a program, just hollow assurances. In contrast to them, you explain the root causes of the war and present a concrete program. I admire the scientific way that you present it. Yes, only the working class can solve this issue.”



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