

Sri Lankan SEP campaigns in impoverished Colombo suburb

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A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team for the April 25 Western Provincial Council elections campaigned last week in Jinthupitiya, a residential area in the northern section of Colombo city. The area is covered with hundreds of small, single-room houses, many built before independence in 1948 and which have seen no improvement since. Many residents are Tamil-speaking.

Traditionally the area housed council workers. As Colombo was consolidated as the island's administrative and commercial centre in the late nineteenth century, its population grew rapidly. Just as indentured labourers were brought from southern India to work in the island's plantations, so unskilled Indian migrants were employed in the menial tasks of street cleaning and sanitation in Colombo.

Over the past century, while the skyline has changed with high-rise office buildings and apartment blocks for the rich, the cramped shanties in Jinthupitiya have only become more dilapidated. The stark contrast underscores the warning made by the Trotskyist movement more than 60 years ago that independence under the national bourgeoisie would be "a conspiracy against the working people".

The dwellings in Jinthupitiya are single-room structures often used by large families. The residents have to use communal toilets and water taps. Off the main street, the footpaths are just a metre wide. While there is a general shortage of housing and amenities for working people in Colombo, the obvious deprivation in this shanty is also a product of anti-Tamil discrimination.

A 2004 Municipal Council survey reported that there were 1,614 poor urban settlement areas in Colombo in which 72,612 families used common toilets and water taps. An article published in the state-owned *Daily News* in November 2007 stated: "The status in the city of Colombo is

alarming as 51 percent of the city residential population live in under-served settlements, which in the traditional terminology are known as slums and shanties."

SEP campaigners spoke to a number of Jinthupitiya residents.

R. Saravanan, a salesman earning 8,000 rupees (\$US70) a month, explained: "I am of the fourth generation living in this house. See the size of the house (8 feet by 10 feet). This is our bedroom, sitting room and also the kitchen. We have to use this room for everything. There are six in our family, including my mother and children. There is no ventilation at all. The houses on either side of this footpath are the same.

"During every election, different politicians come and make promises to provide decent houses. This has happened since my grandparents' time, but nothing has changed. For about 30 families, we have only three toilets and two taps for drinking water. If you come in the morning, you can see a long queue to use the toilet. To get ready to go to work, you have to get up at about 4 a.m."

He described the continual police harassment of residents. "There was a period, about four months back, when we had military checks four or five times a month. We were woken up, mostly at midnight, herded outside and the houses were checked. Even now such checks continue. These have increased with the intensification of the war in the north. The military always blame us for the war. On some occasions, people from this area have been taken away by the army on suspicion and later released. Sometimes people had to pay a large sum of money to get released," he said.

The SEP team had a long discussion with Saravanan about the war, its historical roots and the inability of any of the bourgeois parties to provide basic democratic rights to the island's minorities.

“After what you have said, I now understand what we should do. Many people think that once the government finishes the war, there will be prosperity in the country and people will benefit. How could it happen when the government is unable to solve the Tamil problem and continues to build up the military at an enormous cost? This means even the meagre social benefits we now have will be slashed. If we resist, the guns will be turned against us. We must prepare for that and must have a political organisation to deal with it,” he said.

S. Deen, a female garment worker, said: “My parents have lived here for over 45 years in this one-room house. My parents educated me to advanced level with great difficulty, thinking that in the later part of their lives I could look after them. They are old now. My father is not in a condition to work any more. I have to look after both of them as well as educate my younger brother. This I manage by working 12 hours a day to earn around 14,000 rupees a month. With the present steep price increases for basic food items, electricity and water, it is becoming more and more difficult to bear. I have not married yet, thinking that I would not be able to do what I do now if I started my own family”.

Asked about the war, she said: “Tamils and Sinhalese have lived together without any conflict in this Colombo area for a long time. We all face the same problems as working people. But Tamil politicians as well as Sinhala politicians try to divide us, even when they belong to the same party.

“Mano Ganeshan [Western People’s Front leader] says, ‘Tamils should vote for Tamils’. But he is with the Sinhala chauvinist UNP [United National Party]. According to press reports I have read, he has a good relationship with President Rajapakse and even with his brother and minister Basil Rajapakse too. Hela Urumaya [an extremist Sinhala party] on the other hand says ‘Sinhalese should vote for Sinhala Buddhists’. But they sit in the cabinet with Tamil politicians Thondaman, Chandrasekaran, Devananda and even the LTTE deserter Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan. As you say, it is clear that they are afraid that we the workers and the poor will get united against them.”

A retired worker joined in the discussion: “This is not a democratic election. The supporters of the opposition parties come under police harassment. Recently some people in civilian clothes came by jeep and told a shopkeeper to remove a cut-out of Mano Ganeshan. They said that when they came next time, if the cut-out was still there they would not use words but this—and showed a revolver to the shopkeeper.”

Asked about the government’s anti-democratic methods, the worker added: “The people who have come from the North and East find it very difficult to live in Colombo. Even if they have the necessary documents required by the defence ministry, they are still harassed by the police. Recently, a girl came from Jaffna to go abroad and temporarily boarded in our area. She was arrested despite the fact that she had a passport and other necessary documents.

“Some thugs who work in connivance with politicians and the police do these things to extort money. If they refuse to hand over money, these thugs tell the police that these people are LTTE terrorists. I do not think that this will end even if the LTTE is finished.”

Benita Marriyappan said: “My husband works as a fish stall worker. He gets 600 rupees per day. But the job is not permanent, as fish do not come every day. My father was a worker, and my grandfather was also a worker. Although we have lived in this area for many generations we have not seen any improvement in our living conditions. It has only become more unbearable.

“Every government in the recent decades has spent a lot of money on the war, but they don’t allocate any money for our basic facilities. My experience confirms what you say—that we need a workers’ government to stop the war and solve our problems.”



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