

Sri Lankan SEP campaigns in Tamil suburb in Colombo

Our correspondents

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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters took the party's provincial council election campaign to Wellawatte, in Colombo's south, last weekend. The SEP is fielding 46 candidates in the capital for the Western Provincial Council elections on April 25.

Wellawatte has been a predominately Tamil residential area for more than 100 years. Close to central Colombo, many residents are business professionals and government employees.

The area has been repeatedly targetted by anti-Tamil pogroms since the 1950s. After the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government made Sinhala the only official language in 1956, Tamils protested against being reduced to second class citizens. In response, Sinhala chauvinist thugs attacked Tamil areas in Colombo, forcing many residents in Wellawatte to flee the capital.

The worst pogrom took place in July 1983, known as Black July, as the United National Party (UNP) government prepared to unleash its communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In response to LTTE attacks on soldiers, UNP-backed thugs unleashed a horrific wave of violence in which hundreds of Tamils were killed and injured and their shops and homes burnt down. Wellawatte was one of the worst-hit areas. Tamil people were forced to seek refuge in Hindu temples and Tamil schools.

As the protracted war continued, the area has been subjected to repeated police repression and thug attacks. Since President Mahinda Rajapakse restarted the war in 2006, the situation has worsened. Tamils, particularly young people, have faced arrests, detentions, abductions, extortions and murders. Many young people have fled abroad, leaving mostly the old and very young behind, who live in constant anguish.

As is usual, on the day that the SEP campaigned, armed police, soldiers, sailors and home-guard paramilitaries were stationed in pairs at short distances on both sides of the main street. They randomly checked people going to work. The government and security forces habitually treat every Tamil as the enemy.

An engineer, was initially reticent, but responded when he realised that the SEP was the successor to the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL). He recounted his experience of "Black July": "I was a student at the University of Peradeniya. I rushed home in a friend's car with great difficulty because thugs were checking for Tamils and killing them. On my way from Kandy, I saw several houses burning and a man being killed. Mobs had broken into our house in Hampdon Lane and sacked it. I found my family in a refugee camp at Kathiresan temple."

He said he knew about the RCL's work on the campuses to defend Tamil students from the chauvinists at that time. "Since then, we have lived under threat. There is no reason to believe that things may ease. Extortions and abductions are frequent. Our houses are repeatedly searched without notice. We have to repeatedly register at the police station. Our neighbours have been abducted."

After a long conversation about the SEP's socialist perspective, he commented: "So you have put me into the working class. I am an engineer. In a sense we are also workers. Anyway it is good to feel that I do not stand alone." He remarked that migrant Tamil relatives working abroad had helped families financially, but many were now losing their jobs due to the global economic crisis.

A former student joined in adding: "I do not think that the end of the war will bring about a solution. Not a single Tamil from the North and the East, and also other areas, has gone personally unaffected by the war and repression. We

have relations in Jaffna. Our entire family has been displaced. Large numbers have sought refuge abroad.”

Members of the SEP team explained the party’s opposition to the LTTE’s perspective of establishing a capitalist Tamil statelet. They pointed out that the LTTE was appealing to the same international powers that were supporting the war, while opposing political discussion on an alternative socialist program in the international working class.

When told that LTTE supporters had attacked SEP supporters on demonstrations in London, Paris, Stuttgart and Toronto, the engineer responded: “The LTTE should not do that. Their false policies isolate the Tamils from their real friends. I am happy that your movement is active internationally.”

Mohan, a retired medical doctor, expressed appreciation for the SEP’s defence of the democratic rights of Tamil people. He noted that the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), when it was Trotskyist, had called for equal status for both Sinhala and Tamil languages in 1950. However, the LSSP joined the coalition government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964 and started supporting the Sinhala-only policy. Mohan pointed out that Colvin R. de Silva, another LSSP leader, became the author of the 1972 constitution that made Buddhism the state religion and Sinhala the official language, saying that this betrayal contributed to the present situation.

Many people expressed their disgust over the election, insisting that it would resolve none of the problems confronting ordinary workers.

Thambi, a young man working at a food outlet, at first thought the SEP was just another political party making promises at election time. After a lengthy discussion, he started to speak out, initially dismissing the fight for a socialist perspective as utopian. “We are facing racist repression here. Yours is a dream. We want a strong national force to defeat repression,” he said. But he listened carefully to what the SEP said about the political bankruptcy of the LTTE and agreed to study the SEP’s election material.

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An older Tamil woman explained her family’s traumatic experiences during the war. She was first displaced from Punguduthivu in 1995 and went to Kilinochchi, but then had to shift to Vavuniya a year later. After several months she

came to Colombo and had been living there for 12 years.

“First we had to pay 3,000 rupees (about \$US30) to rent a one-room annex [per month]. Now we have to pay 12,000 rupees. My husband is a retired electrician. He is 65 years old, but has to work in a private company, for 9,000 rupees per month. The day-to-day cost of living is rapidly increasing.

“We can’t move about freely here. Will peace dawn and our living conditions improve after the government ends this war? I am sceptical about that. The situation of Tamil-speaking people will be even worse. But the conditions of the Sinhala poor will also be very bad. Your program seems to show away out. The Sinhala and Tamil poor—the workers as you say—must unite.”

She referred to the economic crisis in countries like Britain. Her relatives had informed her that life was becoming difficult. In previous periods, some people whose children were abroad had managed to buy apartments, but this was no longer the case. She said that of 80 new flats recently built in Colombo, only seven had been sold.

A government employee, who once worked in a now-closed office in Vavuniya, commented on the treachery of the union leaders who claimed to represent the Tamil-speaking plantation workers.

“This war must stop. Up Country Peoples Front leader P. Chandrasekaran and Ceylon Workers Congress leader A. Thondaman went to the Wannu and met with LTTE leaders. In those days, they were speaking about peace. But now they [Chandrasekaran and Thondaman] are in the government and have become ministers. They support the war.

“When compared with the policies of other parties, your program is very different. All parties are speaking in support of war, but I feel different when you speak against the war.”



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