

Sri Lankan SEP stands in the Southern Provincial Council election

The Socialist Equality Party
5 September 2009

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka calls on working people and youth to vote for its candidates in the Southern Provincial Council election on October 10. The party is standing a slate of 26 candidates for the Galle district.

The SEP candidates include plantation and industrial workers, teachers, bank workers, students and housewives. The slate is led by Ratnasiri Malalagama, a founding member of the Revolutionary Communist League (the SEP's forerunner) and an SEP Political Committee member, who has devoted his entire adult life to defending the interests of the working class.

The SEP fights for the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in opposition to the nationalism and communalism of the ruling class and its parties. We insist that the working class can only defend its democratic rights and living standards on the basis of an independent political movement for a workers' and peasants' government as part of the broader struggle for socialism internationally.

The SEP is the only party that has consistently opposed the anti-Tamil war by successive governments in Colombo and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the North and East. We warn that the army's victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will not bring peace and prosperity, but a deepening assault on the living standards and democratic rights of working people.

The treatment of Tamils in the North and East of the island is the sharpest indication of what is being prepared for the working class as a whole. Around 280,000 Tamil civilians are being detained indefinitely in squalid internment camps in flagrant breach of their basic constitutional and legal rights. In the "liberated" areas, new garrisons and army camps are being constructed in preparation for a long-term military occupation.

Workers and youth should not be duped by President Mahinda Rajapakse's triumphalism over the end of the war. This election is the latest in a string of provincial polls called by the government to gain a so-called mandate for its reactionary policies. It has won the previous provincial elections by default as the official opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—have backed Rajapakse's war, support his police-state methods and have no fundamental differences with his economic policies.

The government has already proclaimed a new "economic war" for "nation building". These phrases have only one meaning—the burdens of the country's deepening economic crisis are to be imposed on working people. President Rajapakse has declared that workers must "sacrifice for the nation" just as soldiers sacrificed in the war. In other words, having already paid a terrible price in a quarter century of civil war, workers must now work longer hours for less pay in greater hardship to boost the profits

of the wealthy few.

Rajapakse mortgaged the country to the hilt to pay for his war. Now the economy has been hit by the worst global crisis since the 1930s, forcing the government to go cap in hand to the IMF for a \$US2.6 billion bailout loan. The IMF's conditions include the slashing of the budget deficit from an expected 9 percent of GDP this year to 5 percent in 2011. The government has already imposed a wage freeze this year on all public sector employees. To meet the targets, it will be compelled to make further drastic inroads into public education, health and welfare.

By contrast, the government is spending billions of rupees to bail out ailing industries. It is also opening new free trade zones to attract foreign investors. Rajapakse recently told the *Forbes* magazine that a Singapore-style "one stop shop" would be opened to promote Sri Lanka to foreign investors as an ideal cheap labour platform.

Rajapakse is well aware that a confrontation is looming with the working class. High inflation, job losses and deteriorating social services have made life intolerable for many working people. Workers in the plantations, health services, ports, oil and power sectors are calling for wage increases. Students and unemployed graduates are agitating for jobs and improved public education.

Unable to grant these demands, the government is preparing to use the police-state apparatus developed in the course of the war to suppress the struggles of working people. Despite the end of the war, Rajapakse has maintained emergency rule—with the assistance of the opposition parties—and the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act. Far from demobilising troops, the government plans to expand the army by another 50,000 soldiers, not only to create garrisons in the North and East, but also to suppress social unrest throughout the island.

Over the past four years, Rajapakse has increasingly ruled through a politico-military cabal comprising his brothers, top military chiefs and senior state bureaucrats. He has ignored the constitution, flouted Supreme Court rulings and reduced cabinet and parliament to a rubber stamp. Journalists and government opponents have been abducted, beaten up or murdered by shadowy death squads that operate with the complicity of the security forces.

The SEP warns that the same methods will be used against the working class. In the course of the war, Rajapakse repeatedly denounced striking workers for undermining "national security". He will use similar rhetoric against anyone who threatens his "nation building". Last month the government deployed navy nurses to break a strike at the Cancer Hospital. Now it is threatening power workers with the military and police if they take action over pay.

None of the opposition parties represents the interests of workers and the oppressed.

The right-wing United National Party (UNP) initiated the war in 1983, ruthlessly prosecuted it for more than a decade, and gave its full support to Rajapakse's renewed conflict. Far from opposing the government's austerity measures, the UNP has publicly supported the IMF loan and its terms. Its posturing in defence of democratic rights has no credibility given its own autocratic methods of rule between 1983 and 1994.

The JVP campaigned for Rajapakse during the 2005 presidential election, supported his war to the hilt and voted for his government's budgets despite remaining on the opposition benches. While it poses as a defender of working people, the JVP, its unions and other front organisations sabotage any struggles of workers that threaten to undermine the government. Several months ago the JVP submitted its own "nation building" proposals to Rajapakse as the basis for entering his government.

The ex-radicals of the United Socialist Party (USP) and Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) are also contesting Southern Provincial Council elections. Both these parties have a long record of opportunist alliances with one or other of the major capitalist parties. The hallmark of their politics is an organic hostility to a struggle for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie.

For years, the USP and NSSP aligned with Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, claiming that it represented the "lesser evil" as compared to the right-wing UNP. Now these parties proclaim the same about the UNP. The USP is part of the UNP's Platform for Freedom, claiming it will defend democratic rights. The NSSP quit this alliance recently, but continues to insist that the UNP represents a better alternative than the Rajapakse government.

The NSSP and USP postured as opponents of the war. In reality, these parties backed the imperialist-sponsored peace process and the ceasefire signed by the UNP government in 2002 to initiate peace talks with the LTTE. In doing so, they helped create illusions in the UNP's efforts to reach a power-sharing deal between the Sinhala and Tamil elites to end the war and intensify their mutual exploitation of the working class.

In opposition to all of these parties, the SEP and its candidates advance a program based on the principles of socialist internationalism. Workers must reject the poison of nationalism and racism which has been exploited by the ruling class and its political servants since independence to split the working class. We call on all workers to defend the democratic rights of Tamils and demand the immediate and unconditional release of those interned in detention camps, the withdrawal of security forces from the North and East as well as the end of emergency rule, the Prevention of Terrorism Act and other anti-democratic measures.

Tamil workers and youth must draw the necessary political lessons from the LTTE's collapse. Its defeat was not just a military, but a political debacle. The LTTE's divisive program of Tamil separatism represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the Tamil masses. In the name of defending the "Tamil nation," the LTTE deepened the communal divide through its terrorist attacks on Sinhala civilians and ruthlessly suppressed its political opponents. Its demand for a capitalist Eelam always depended on the support of one or more of the major powers and proved to be a disastrous dead-end. Tamil workers and youth can only defend their living standards and basic rights through a common class

struggle with working people throughout the island.

The SEP fights for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. The allies of working people are not to be found among the corrupt and venal political parties that have brought nothing but war, poverty and misery over the past 60 years, but among workers in South Asia and internationally who are being forced to bear the brunt of the worst global recession since the 1930s.

The universal answer of the ruling class is to impose the full burden of the economic crisis onto the working class while battling their rivals on the world stage for economic and strategic domination. More than 50 million people are forecast to lose their jobs around the world. In the US, the number of unemployed has grown by nearly 10 million over the past year alone. To stave off its economic decline, the US is using its military might in neo-colonial wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Pakistan to assert its influence over the energy-rich Middle East and Central Asia. Every corner of the globe is now the arena of great power rivalry that is leading to war.

The working class must advance its own international strategy. The SEP, together with its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, seeks to mobilise the working class to abolish the bankrupt capitalist system and replace it with a planned world economy. In Sri Lanka, it is only the working class that provides a way out of the misery facing the oppressed rural masses. The SEP fights for a workers' and farmers' government to reconstruct society along socialist lines to meet the needs of the majority, not the wealthy few. We call for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as a part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

The SEP advocates the following policies:

Secure and well-paid jobs for all

Capitalism is incapable of ending the scourge of unemployment. The SEP proposes the expansion of jobs through the reduction of the working week to 30 hours, with no loss of pay. Tens of billions of rupees must be poured into a program of public works to create hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs and build infrastructure, including public housing, schools, hospitals and roads, in particular in the war-ravaged north and east of the country.

For high quality, free public education and health care

The first casualties of the government's austerity drive will be essential social services. It has already opened the door for private universities for the wealthy few and cut spending for state universities and public schools, leading to inadequate staffing, overcrowding and rundown facilities. The SEP calls for a vast expansion of public education to provide free, high quality education, up to and including university level, for all who wish to pursue their studies.

The government's contempt for public health care is underscored by its recent refusal to provide basic safety equipment for nurses at the Cancer Hospital. The rundown of the public health system has led to growing outbreaks of deadly diseases like dengue. Public hospitals are starved of essential medicine and equipment while private hospitals are encouraged for those who can afford to pay. The SEP demands an end to profiteering in health and the establishment of well-equipped and properly staffed public hospitals and clinics to provide high quality health care free of charge to everyone.

Eradicate rural poverty

Six decades of capitalist rule has not solved any basic problems facing the rural population. A 2007 World Bank study found that 88 percent of Sri Lanka's poor live in rural areas. Farmers are plagued by a lack of land and heavy debt. Subsidies have been slashed. Recent price rises have boosted the profits of middlemen and big business at the expense of farmers and consumers. Fishermen face the added burden of onerous military restrictions.

The SEP calls for state land to be made available to all landless farmers, regardless of their ethnicity. Bank loans, agricultural equipment, fertilisers and chemicals must be provided to all poor farmers on easy terms. The price of agricultural produce should be guaranteed so as to ensure a decent standard of living for farming families. All military restrictions on fishing must be abolished immediately.

Big business and their political representatives will brand these proposals as “unrealistic” and “impractical” and declare there is no money to carry them out. Implementation of these proposals is incompatible with the capitalist private property system. The financial resources can be mobilised by reorganising society from top to bottom in the interests of the majority, not the profits of the corporate elite. The banks and major corporations must be placed under the democratic control of the working class.

The SEP has launched a vigorous campaign in the Southern Provincial Council election to initiate the widest possible discussion among working people about the urgent necessity for a socialist alternative to the government's “economic war”. We call on workers, young people, housewives, professionals, small farmers and the unemployed to actively support our campaign by donating to the party's fund, attending our public meetings, distributing our campaign literature and voting for our candidates. Above all, we urge workers and youth to study our perspective and program and to apply to join and build the SEP.

Contact the SEP by telephone at 2712104 (Sri Lanka) or by email at wswscmb@slt.net.lk.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact