

# Sri Lankan SEP holds first meeting for Southern Provincial Council election

**Our correspondents**  
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) launched its campaign for the Southern Provincial Council election with a public meeting at the Fisheries Meeting Hall in the coastal town of Ambalangoda on September 10. The SEP, which is the only party offering a socialist alternative for working people in the October 10 ballot, is standing a slate of 26 candidates for the Galle district.

SEP members campaigned in working class neighbourhoods, work places and villages throughout the area in the lead-up to the meeting, distributing thousands of copies of the party's election statement. Workers, youth and housewives attended what was the SEP's first meeting in the area for several years.

The southern province is ranked the island's fourth poorest with the overwhelming majority of families involved in farming and fishing. Almost a quarter of the province's population live below the official poverty line.

While the government claims to have mass support because of the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May, it is acutely nervous about increasing mass discontent over the rising cost of living, unemployment and rural poverty. Government officials have promised "new development" projects in the province to hoodwink voters. Election monitoring groups have noted instances of violence by ruling party candidates.

SEP political committee member Ratnasiri Malalagama, who heads the party slate, chaired the meeting. He pointed out that the election was being held amid the worst crisis of capitalism since the 1930s and that thousands of workers were losing their jobs through factory closures and the collapse of banks and financial institutions. The reaction of governments everywhere has been to impose the full burden of the crisis onto the working masses, Malalagama said, "However, working people have shown they are not ready to shoulder the crisis and are coming into struggle."

Malalagama explained that the war, which erupted in 1983, was the product of systematic anti-Tamil discrimination by

successive Colombo governments. After being handed the levers of power by the former British colonial rulers in 1948, Sri Lanka's new government specifically targeted Tamil-speaking plantation workers, who had played a leading role in 1946 general strike against British rule. One of its first measures was to abolish the citizenship rights of the plantation workers. Other racially discriminatory measures followed, with the declaration of Sinhala as sole official language in 1956 and Buddhism as state religion in 1972.

The inability of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led coalition government from 1970-77 to address any of the pressing problems of workers and youth opened the way for the election of the right-wing United National Party (UNP) in 1977. Its integration of Sri Lanka into the world capitalist economy cut the living standards of the working masses and when workers fought back with a general strike in 1980, the UNP crushed the movement and sacked around 100,000 strikers en masse.

The speaker explained that the UNP government initiated the military conflict against the Tamils in 1983 to divide the working class along racial lines and break up mass opposition to its socially-regressive policies.

Malalagama pointed out that although the war was officially declared to be over, anti-Tamil discrimination continued. About 300,000 Tamil civilians who fled the final stages of war were still being held indefinitely in detention camps in the North in appalling social conditions and in violation of their basic democratic rights.

Commenting on the SEP's election campaign, Malalagama added: "There is not any other organisation that addresses the vital issues of the global economic crisis as well as the crisis of Sri Lankan bourgeois rule. The SEP has decided to contest this election in order to open the widest possible discussion over the critical problems facing workers, youth, fishermen and women."

International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) convenor,

Kapila Fernando, told the meeting: “After the end of its so-called war against terror, the government has declared another war—an ‘economic war’ for ‘nation building’. This war is aimed at slashing the living standards of the working class and the youth and to suppress all opposition to government policy.

“Without building the SEP as the world party of socialist revolution, none of the great social issues facing the masses can be solved. The problems confronted by people in this area can’t be solved on a provincial or even national basis.”

Fernando explained that despite great advances in every area, such as science, technology, communication, transportation, etc., a billion people were starving in the world. This was because humanity still lived under capitalism—an obsolete social system. To direct the advancement of science and technology for the betterment of humanity as a whole, the capitalist system must be overthrown.

The speaker warned that capitalism had only survived over the past century through world wars that destroyed millions of human lives. Unless working people put an end to the profit system, he said, humanity would face the same catastrophe again.

The meeting’s main speaker, SEP general secretary and WSWs International Editorial Board member Wije Dias, began by explaining that the government’s decision to hold the election had nothing to do with the defence of democratic rights of the ordinary people.

“The ruling circle led by President Mahinda Rajapakse is becoming increasingly hostile to the masses, both in regard to their social conditions and their democratic rights. Parliament has been converted into a rubber stamp on decisions taken by this tiny ruling circle. And the situation is the same in the provincial councils.”

Dias referred to the arrest under emergency regulations of three journalists attached to *Lanka*, a weekly publication run by the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). “This incident,” he said “has revealed the real nature of the government which was brought to power with JVP support.” If such methods were being used against the government’s former allies, they would be used more broadly against working people.

Dias pointed out that from the outset of the war in 1983, the SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), had continuously warned that while the war began against Tamils, similar methods would be used against the working class as a whole.

“What will happen to the workers in the South is revealed by the fate of the detained Tamil civilians in the North, who are being held in virtual concentration camp conditions. The working class can only deal with the challenges that lie ahead by drawing the necessary political lessons from this situation.”

Dias pointed to the economic crisis confronting the Rajapakse government. Sri Lanka’s total debt payment for 2009 was almost 750 billion rupees (\$US6.5 billion) but its total revenue for the year was estimated to be less than 600 billion rupees. In order to cover this deficit the government had been forced to approach the International Monetary Fund. The IMF eventually approved a loan but demanded that the Rajapakse government lower the budget deficit to 7 percent of GDP in 2010 and 5 percent in 2011. This would drastically reduce the already-limited subsidies and other welfare measures.

Dias explained that the Sri Lankan military was increasingly dominating all aspects of life. He quoted from a recent *Far Eastern Economic Review* article that stated that “a parasitical network of politicians, Mafiosi and the military could extend its tentacles into business life”.

Dias noted that former army commander General Sarath Fonseka was currently lecturing Sri Lanka’s business elite about how to overcome the economic crisis. Recent reports revealed that military officials have been given 15,000 acres for banana cultivation in the army-controlled East.

No doubt corporate leaders and their politicians would argue that the SEP’s socialist proposals were not realistic, the speaker said. But what was unreal was not socialism but a humane capitalism that provides for the needs of working people. To achieve socialism, the working class had to take the road of class struggle.

“The 1964 betrayal by Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—which entered into a bourgeois coalition government—robbed the working class of a socialist perspective. However, objective conditions will propel the workers and the rural masses into struggle. Workers throughout the world face the same exploitation by international capital. What is required is their unification on the basis of a socialist program,” he said.

After the meeting, there was a lively discussion with some of those attending offering to help in the SEP’s campaign.



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