

Sri Lankan SEP holds final election meeting in Galle

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party held the final meeting in its campaign for the Southern Provincial Council election on October 10 last Sunday in Galle town hall. The party is standing a slate of 26 candidates for the Galle district.

Prior to the meeting, the SEP and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) campaigned in the Galle municipal area and suburbs. The city of around 100,000 people, situated about 110 kilometres south of Colombo, is the provincial capital. Galle was devastated by the December 2004 tsunami, which killed thousands of people.

Campaign teams handed out the SEP's campaign material establishing the roots of the current economic crisis in Sri Lanka in the government's protracted communal war and the worst global recession since the 1930s. In opposition to the false promises of the parties of the political establishment, the SEP outlined the socialist policies on which the working class must begin to base its own independent struggle.

SEP teams encountered many people who were bitter about government and opposition parties alike.

D.G. Gunapala, 58, who is unable to work due to cancer, explained: "My eldest daughter's husband is a mason but he can't find work due to the collapse of the construction industry. My younger daughter works in a nearby garment factory but she often gets ill because of the hard work. She earns only 7,000 rupees [\$US61] a month. My wife works as a housemaid and she gets only 200 rupees per day. And I make hoppers [a Sri Lankan staple] to sell.

"Elections and governments are for the rich and have nothing to do with poor. Previously I supported the United National Party but now I am against all these parties," he said.

In Cheena Koratuwe, Daya told the SEP that her family had lost everything in the tsunami. Her husband had returned to Sri Lanka in 2004 after working in Italy for 8 years. Their house was completely destroyed. "Because we did not have proper legal documents for the land, the government did not pay any

tsunami compensations for our damaged house," she said. Her husband is now working in a textile shop for just 300 rupees a day.

"I have no faith in any of these parties," she said. "President Rajapakse's People's Alliance might win but it is hard to believe it can help the people. The war ended six months ago but the president and the government are still talking about the victory. The government doesn't take any action to reduce the unbearable price of goods."

An army deserter, who now sells fruit, spoke about the plight of the soldiers who were used as cannon fodder by the army, particularly in the final months of the war. "Like other soldiers I joined the army because of unemployment. Hundreds of soldiers of my age were killed in the last period of the war. That's why I didn't return [to the frontline] after I came home for my vacation."

Months after the end of the war, heavy security measures remain in force throughout the island. As the SEP was conducting its meeting, hundreds of police arrived at the Galle town hall as part of security arrangements for a rally attended by President Rajapakse in the city the next day. The main hall had been provided to security personnel as lodging, without the SEP being informed.

A Presidential Security Division (PSD) officer told the SEP that it had to be out of the premises before 6.00 p.m. The SEP insisted on its democratic rights and the meeting was held as arranged. Some of the roads in the city had already been closed off in preparation for the rally. However, around 60 people attended the SEP meeting.

Ratnasiri Malalagama, who heads the party's slate, chaired the meeting. In opening, he outlined the crisis facing world capitalism. "Now working people all over the world face a similar situation as in the 1930s. In September, 263,000 workers lost their jobs in the US alone. It has been estimated that 50 million will lose their jobs this year. Over 1 billion people are expected to be on the edge of starvation."

Referring to Sri Lanka, Malalagama said: “Out of 20 factories in Koggala free trade zone in Galle district, 5 have been closed and thousands of workers have lost their jobs. In the remaining factories, overtime work has been slashed and speed-ups are being implemented.

“At fishing villages in Ambalangoda, Balapitiya and Kataluwa we learned that most fishermen are unable even to earn enough for their daily food. Equipment prices have reached unbearable heights.” He emphasised that the SEP campaign was aimed at promoting the widest possible discussion of a socialist solution to the crisis facing working people.

Kapila Fernando, the ISSE convener in Sri Lanka, said: “The SEP insists that the end of the three decade long communal war in Sri Lanka does not mark a victory for working people. It has only strengthened the hands of right-wing communal and militarist forces in Colombo that are now turning against workers and youth.”

Fernando pointed to the political dead-end of the guerrilla movements that were formed in the 1960s and 1970s like the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Neither offered a viable alternative for the oppressed masses. The LTTE represented the interests of the Tamil elite, not ordinary Tamil working people. The JVP has now become an integral part of the Colombo political establishment.

In delivering the main report, Wije Dias, SEP general secretary, pointed to the anti-democratic methods of the ruling parties in attempting to steamroller the electorate into voting in their favour. “The methods used in the war against the Tamil minority in the North and East are now being introduced in the south. As never before, the military, police and organised thugs are being used to suppress any opposition,” he said.

“The intimidating intervention of the security division of the president here in ordering us to close down the meeting by 6 p.m. is part of these autocratic methods. The SEP, which is committed to defending the democratic rights of the people won through long drawn-out battles by the working class, has no intention of surrendering its legitimate right to hold a meeting until the agenda is completed,” Dias said, to applause from the audience.

The speaker explained that despite the government’s endless triumphalism over the LTTE’s defeat, people were beginning to realise the dangers posed by the Rajapakse government. It has become rule by a cabal comprising the president’s relations, close cronies and military top brass and has turned

parliament into a rubber stamp. The regime increasingly violates the constitution and the law with impunity. In this context, the election had nothing to do with democracy.

Dias said that the government continued to whip up communal tensions to divide working people. That was one purpose of keeping more than 250,000 Tamil men women and children behind barbed wire. He warned that these internment camps would become the pattern to deal with the opposition of working people elsewhere on the island. This was why the SEP fought for the withdrawal of the military from the North and East and for the unconditional shutting down of these prison camps.

Dias referred to the experience of the working class in late 1940s shortly after independence. The government’s decision to abolish the citizenship rights of Tamil-speaking plantation workers was the prelude to a wholesale assault on the social benefits of all people just three years later. In 1952, the price of subsidised rice increased three-fold, the free mid-day meal for schoolchildren was withdrawn, and postal rates and train fares increased.

The speaker explained: “In 1953, working people, Sinhala and Tamil, throughout the country resorted to a hartal—a general strike supported by a mass uprising of the poor—to reverse these attacks. That was at a time that world capitalism was undergoing a period of boom. Today capitalism worldwide is experiencing its worst crisis since the 1930s. Workers and youth in Sri Lanka are being forced to pay for this crisis as well as to cover the huge cost of the 26-year war.

“To face these economic and political challenges, the working class needs an alternative international socialist perspective and a revolutionary party. To achieve this, the working class must break from all the organisations, including the trade unions, that are based on a nationalist program that serves capitalism not working people.

“It is to mobilise the working class towards this end that the SEP has launched a campaign to establish Action Committees in every workplace as independent organisations of workers and the rural poor. Our election campaign was to explain these vital political issues.”

Dias concluded by appealing to the audience to join the party.



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