

Sri Lanka: SEP election team campaigns among cinnamon peelers

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka recently campaigned in the rural area of Karandeniya in the Southern Province as part of its election campaign for the Provincial Council election on October 10. The SEP is standing a slate of 26 candidates in the Galle district.

Karandeniya is situated about 30 kilometres inland from Galle, the capital and main city in the Southern Province. Most of the villagers are farmers who are mainly engaged in cinnamon cultivation, which dates back several centuries. Cinnamon is still a significant foreign exchange earning export.

The Galle district is the country's main cinnamon producing area with more than 10,500 hectares under cultivation. Most production takes place on smallholdings, with the average size of a cinnamon plantation being about 0.5 hectares. Only 5 to 10 percent of plantations are in the range 8-20 hectares.

Around 350,000 families are dependent on the industry, with about 30,000 employed to peel the bark from the cinnamon trees. Poverty-stricken small producers and workers have been hard hit by recent price falls, high production costs and the increased cost of living.

The main market for Sri Lankan cinnamon is Mexico but exports also go to the US, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Guatemala. But the product faces competition from a cheaper alternative, cassia, which is produced in China, Vietnam and Indonesia. The average price of cinnamon is \$US6 a kilogram, compared to \$1.80 for cassia. The price for top grade cinnamon previously fell from 900 rupees (about \$US8) to 450 rupees and has only now rebounded to some extent.

As one small producer, Dharmadasa, told the SEP: "We

have to spend about 35,000 rupees per acre for fertiliser and to prepare the land for cultivation. The best harvest one can get from an acre of cinnamon is only 175 kilos. We harvest twice each year. Now, one kilo of cinnamon is worth only 700 rupees. So our annual income is 120,000 rupees. Cinnamon peelers have to be paid about half of our income. So we have only 25,000 rupees for six months. How can we live on 4,000 rupees a month?"

The cinnamon peelers, however, are even poorer and more oppressed. Cinnamon peeling involves hard physical work. People wake early and usually have a long walk to reach the cinnamon peeling huts. Most work groups are based on families and extended families.

Breakfast takes place after the cinnamon sticks are collected from the trees. Then the laborious process of peeling away the bark begins. To reach the inner cinnamon peel, the outer part has to be removed. The stick is first rubbed with a brass rod to soften the bark. The softened peel is stripped away with a sharp knife and left to dry. Once dried, the peels are joined together in a long cinnamon rod using smaller cinnamon peels. Then the rods are again dried.

The SEP team spoke to one group of cinnamon peelers—two parents who were both 60, their son and his wife. The father explained: "I have been involved in this industry for 40 years. We work for 13 hours a day, from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. We cannot peel more than 12 kilos of cinnamon a day. To collect the cinnamon sticks in the early morning is very difficult. We receive only half the value of what we peel. As the price of cinnamon has fallen we get only a small amount of money. Altogether we get 6,000 rupees a week. We cannot provide education

for our children on this income. So our children also work with us.”

Another person, who collects cinnamon to sell to the traders, told the SEP: “Several people like me collect cinnamon by going from house to house and make a living by selling it. When we sell the cinnamon to a wholesale dealer, he gives a dated cheque. As we need money to buy more cinnamon, we exchange our cheques [at money lenders] on a big commission. If the cinnamon price is high, we make some profit. But now the price has gone down and we are unable to sell our cinnamon collected. Our debts have increased. I have stopped selling cinnamon. Now I am trying to figure out how to meet my daily expenses.”

Speaking about the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), he said: “The government does not care about our problems. The government said it had no money for concessions [to us] since they were spending it on the war. But even after the war has ended [in May], they play the same record. We cannot speak about our problems under this government. They have deprived us of the right to freely speak.”

Piyadasa, 50, another cinnamon cultivator, explained his experience with the United Union of the Cinnamon Producers (UUCP). The UUCP is affiliated to the opposition party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which staunchly backed President Mahinda Rajapakse’s renewed communal war against the LTTE. “When they formed this union, they promised us that they would fight for our demands until we won. Many of us joined the union. We paid a membership fee but nothing has happened,” he said.

As discontent spread among cinnamon producers, the UUCP held a press conference in Colombo in January. UUCP convener and JVP MP Ajith Kumara threatened to take action if the government did not redress the problems facing the industry and the people who depended on it. But the JVP stalled any protest action, fearing it would interfere with the war effort.

The JVP, which emerged in the 1960s as an advocate of rural guerrillaism and Sinhala populism, is now part of the Colombo political establishment. In 2004, it joined the

government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, and, while now in opposition, helped Rajapakse to win office in 2005. The party previously had a significant base of support, particularly among impoverished Sinhalese youth in areas like Karadeniya, but that constituency is evaporating.

One resident of Karadeniya, an electrician, told the SEP: “The cinnamon industry in this area has already deteriorated and there is no money in the hands of the people who depend on it. When they have money they come to me for repairs and other services. Actually I didn’t have a single job last week. President Rajapakse and his government always are talking about the victory over the LTTE. But we want solutions for our burning problems. We know that any government won’t solve our problems.

“I don’t know much about socialism but I like the main element of that: equality. We thought that the JVP was a socialist party and that they would fight to solve our problems. However, through my experiences, I know that the JVP is not a socialist party at all. Socialists can’t be communalist. Earlier they had support in this area. Now that is no longer the case because they are not fighting for the needs of people.”

The continuing poverty of cinnamon workers and small producers is an indictment of all of the parties of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, including the ex-radicals of the JVP who claimed that rural guerrillaism was a solution to their problems. It is only the working class that can offer the rural masses a way out of their oppressive conditions by mobilising them in the fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government that provide decent living standards for rural workers and cheap credit and aid to struggling small producers. That is the perspective that the SEP is fighting for in the Southern Province elections.



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