

Sri Lanka: Vote SEP in the Southern Provincial Council election

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers, farmers and youth in the Galle district to vote for its slate of candidates in the Southern Provincial Council elections on Saturday.

The SEP is the only party fighting for international socialism against the divisive communalism of all the parties of the Colombo political establishment. We are campaigning to unify Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers and the poor to defend their common class interests and democratic rights that are being trampled by President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government.

The ruling parties have engaged in an unprecedented campaign of thuggery and intimidation against the opposition parties, despite their connivance with the government on every major issue. Every anti-democratic trick in the book—from the use of the security state forces and thugs to intimidate voters and the burning down of opposition offices, to the unrestrained use of government resources and funds—has been employed to ensure victory. As of Tuesday, PAFFERAL, an election monitoring organisation, had recorded 180 cases of electoral abuse.

The resort to such methods only underscores the weakness of the government, which has only one plank in its election program: to boast about the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May. Many workers and youth have begun to question Rajapakse's lies. The end of the war has not brought peace and prosperity, but further economic hardship and harsher anti-democratic measures. The communal war against the island's Tamils has been replaced by Rajapakse's "economic war" to impose the burdens of the country's economic crisis on working people.

The SEP warned from the outset of the war in 1983 that the attempt to forcibly suppress the democratic rights of Tamils would inevitably be directed against the rights and

living standards of the working class and oppressed masses as a whole. That warning is now being fully vindicated. Workers and the rural poor who were told to sacrifice for Rajapakse's bogus "war on terrorism" are now being forced to pay for the huge military budgets as well as the impact of the worst global crisis of capitalism since the 1930s.

As is happening around the world, workers in Sri Lanka confront an onslaught on their living standards. The government has frozen public sector wages and jobs, slashed social spending and cut back on price subsidies. Private companies have followed suit. As a result, working people are finding it increasingly difficult to live as prices continue to skyrocket, caused in part by new taxes on goods and services. For the poorest layers of society, the problem has been reduced to that of putting food on the table.

Young people simply have no future under capitalism. Labor Minister Athauda Seneviratne recently revealed that the government has created just 6,000 civilian jobs—a paltry 1,500 a year—since Rajapakse took office four years ago. There are no vacancies in the public or private sectors. The only jobs are in the military as the government proceeds with its plans to turn the former war zones of the North and East into vast military camps. Thousands of university graduates are unemployed. At least 100,000 youth who sat the advanced level exam have been unable to get a university place.

The Rajapakse regime has only one answer to growing social discontent: state repression. Even though the war is over, the vast police state apparatus built up over decades of war not only remains intact but is being boosted. Draconian emergency regulations are routinely renewed by parliament every month, with the backing of the main opposition parties. Detention without trial continues under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Road blocks, identity checks and street patrols by heavily armed soldiers are just as extensive in Colombo and throughout the island as they were

during the war. Sweeping search operations by security forces in residential areas continue in the name of weeding out LTTE cadres.

With the support of the opposition United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the government has compulsorily interned more than 250,000 Tamil civilians in “welfare villages” since May. This gross abuse of democratic rights is the clearest demonstration that Rajapakse and his politico-military cabal no longer regard themselves as bound by country’s constitution, legal system and parliamentary norms.

In the course of its election campaign, the SEP has warned that the methods of mass indefinite imprisonment will be turned against the working class as it comes forward to fight for its democratic rights and living standards. The party has launched a campaign to demand the immediate and unconditional release of all detainees, the closure of the camps, the withdrawal of all troops from the North and East, and the provision of billions of rupees to help them rebuild their lives.

The main opposition parties have only distinguished themselves by their utter prostration to the government. Mired in Sinhala chauvinism, the UNP and JVP backed Rajapakse’s renewed war and, in the aftermath of the LTTE’s defeat, have been competing for a share of the “glory”. The UNP now claims that its ceasefire with the LTTE in 2002 was a clever subterfuge to enable the military to rebuild after its shattering defeats in 2000. The JVP boasts that it helped Rajapakse to win the 2005 presidential election and to push his government tear up the ceasefire.

Neither party has any answers to the economic crisis that is leading to worsening unemployment and poverty. Absurdly, both the UNP and JVP blame the country’s economic woes on “waste and corruption”, which is undoubtedly rife in ruling circles, but hardly the reason for the huge war debts, foreign exchange crisis, falling growth rates and plunge in export earnings. Nor have these parties opposed the government’s IMF loan, which comes with a raft of austerity measures that will only compound the social crisis facing the masses.

The Tamil-based opposition parties are no different. In the aftermath of the LTTE’s defeat, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which functioned as an LTTE mouthpiece, is now accommodating to the Rajapakse government. Neither the TNA nor the LTTE have demanded the immediate release of the Tamil detainees, but appeal to the “international

community” to push for their “speedy resettlement”. In their wake, ex-radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party foster the same illusion—that the major powers, which backed the war, and the UN, which foots the bill for the prison camps, will defend the rights of Tamils.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Up Country People’s Front (UPF), which function as political parties and trade unions among the largely Tamil-speaking plantation workers, are both partners in Rajapakse’s ruling coalition. The CWC and allied unions recently imposed a poverty-level daily wage of 405 rupees (\$US3.50) on the island’s half a million estate workers for the next two years. The UPF, which claims to oppose the deal, is seeking to contain and suppress the widespread anger among workers.

Workers at the Balmoral Estate, with the SEP’s political assistance, recently formed their own independent action committee and issued an appeal to workers throughout the plantations and other workplaces to do likewise, as the first step in a counter-offensive to defend jobs, wages and conditions. Their decision stemmed from profound frustration over the betrayal of the unions, hostility towards the entire political establishment and a recognition that a socialist alternative was required to combat the onslaught on their living standards.

The formation of the action committee was an important first step towards establishing the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie. Only by mobilising as an independent force can workers win to their side the oppressed masses in the fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies. Such a struggle cannot be waged just in Sri Lanka, but requires a turn to workers throughout South Asia and internationally who are also being forced to pay for the crisis of global capitalism for which they are not responsible.

The SEP is the only party in Sri Lanka fighting for this perspective. We call on workers, villagers, young people and intellectuals to demonstrate their support for a socialist alternative by casting their vote for the SEP in this provincial election. We urge workers and youth to seriously study our history and program and to join and build the SEP as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.



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