

Sri Lanka: Election meeting participants speak to the WSWS

Our correspondent
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WSWS reporters spoke with some participants in the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) inaugural election meeting last weekend. They expressed disgust at the entire political establishment, wanted to understand the sharp changes in the political situation, and were struck by the socialist alternative outlined by the SEP's presidential candidate Wijie Dias and other speakers at the meeting.

Plantation workers from the Balmoral Estate at Agarapathana in the central hills district of the island attended the meeting. With the political assistance of the SEP, workers there organised an independent action committee in bitter opposition to the betrayal of their wages struggle by the trade unions in September.

One Balmoral worker commented: "In my opinion no one can vote for the main candidates. The entire country knows their bloody record [in the war]. How many precious lives have they destroyed? During every election they come out with attractive promises. We in the plantations have been given many promises. Plantation workers should be given better housing and sanitary facilities, yet we are living in same line rooms."

The plantation worker denounced the trade unions for imposing a poverty-level pay rise and increased workloads through their September agreement with the employers. "As you explained, whether [President] Rajapakse or [General] Fonseka wins, workers' problems will not be solved."

Another worker condemned the plantation trade unions' support for Rajapakse and Fonseka. "During the last [presidential election] the Ceylon Workers

Congress [CWC] backed the opposition United National Party candidate, Ranil Wickremesinghe. The National Union of Workers and Ceylon Workers Alliance supported Rajapakse. The CWC now backs Rajapakse while the other two support Fonseka. They don't represent us.

"People should lay the foundation for a [political] alternative. After hearing you I understand the workers should unite independently of the ruling class parties and fight for their own government. I will ask all workers to vote for the SEP, rally around it and lay the foundation for a workers' government."

K. Shanmugam is a former worker from the Government Press who was sacked during the 1980 general strike. He was a once a member of the Stalinist Communist Party (CP)-led faction in the trade unions. The CP is a partner in Rajapakse's ruling coalition.

"The CP leaders told us that we could not win workers' rights without joining a government party. So we believed them and supported the Madam Bandaranaike-led coalition government. CP leader Pieter Keuneman became a government minister, but they did not give workers any of their rights. Strikes were crushed. In the end, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party [LSSP] and CP were thrown out of the government. Workers staged the general strike of 1976. The strike fizzled out. This paved the way for the United National Party [UNP] in 1977.

"The civil war was launched by the UNP. It is disgusting that the CP supported the war. I am ashamed that I was in an organisation led by such people. The end of the war has not brought relief to the masses as

these leaders promised. The opposite has happened. Many are asking why the president has called the election early. In today's meeting Comrade Wijie Dias gave the correct answer. Your party talked about the history, and the world situation. I would like to join your election work."

A non-academic employee at the University of Moratuwa told the WSWs: "Mahinda Rajapakse called presidential elections two years early because his chance of winning is declining." Commenting on various promises made by Fonseka to abolish the executive presidency, establish democracy and raise public sector salaries by 10,000 rupees, he said: "Those are only fantasy stories."

Wasantha, a Hatton National Bank employee, commented: "The government doesn't have an economic program to improve the living conditions of people. The UNP was unable to find its own candidate for the presidential elections. The JVP faced the same situation. It has split. Covering up their own crises, they have come together to field Fonseka as a common candidate.

"Fonseka was known for his rudeness as army commander. I have some friends in the army. They told me when Fonseka visited any camp, they all were in full alert. If Fonseka comes to power, I think the country will be plunged into military rule. If Fonseka is elected, he will carry out wider autocratic rule than Rajapakse."

"Unlike the SEP, all other parties treat Sinhalese people as number one and Tamils as number two. The outcome of that was war. But the SEP advocates equal rights for Tamils and Sinhalese. That is the correct policy."

A University of Colombo student expressed agreement with Dias's speech to the meeting. "I respect the SEP and its program," she said. "Rajapakse calculates that he will be able to win power by exploiting the military victory. He will further increase the repression after winning office again. Neither Rajapakse nor Fonseka has a program to solve the problems of ordinary people.

"None of them has any concerns about students—that is our experience. Whoever comes to power will not hesitate to brutally suppress the basic rights of students, as well as others".



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