

Sri Lankan SEP announces presidential candidate

**The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
9 December 2009**

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) will stand General Secretary Wijie Dias in the January 26 presidential election in Sri Lanka. The SEP is the only party participating in the election that is fighting to mobilise the working class on the basis of a socialist program against the deepening onslaught on living conditions and democratic rights.

The elections have been called two years early amid a severe political and economic crisis. President Mahinda Rajapakse counted on exploiting the army's defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May to divert attention from his government's autocratic methods of rule and its responsibility for the worsening social crisis. The longer the poll was delayed, the worse the state of the economy was likely to be and, therefore, Rajapakse's chances of re-election.

The president calculated that he would face a divided opposition. He had already tested the waters in a series of provincial council elections and decisively defeated the opposition parties—not because the government was broadly popular, but because the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) offered no alternative. Both these parties backed the communal war against the LTTE and neither has any fundamental disagreement with the government's pro-market economic agenda.

Rather than fielding their own candidates, however, the UNP and JVP are backing General Sarath Fonseka as their "common candidate". Until his resignation last month, Fonseka was the country's top general, who ruthlessly prosecuted Rajapakse's war over the past three years. By fielding their own "war hero", the UNP and JVP hope to neutralise Rajapakse's grandstanding over the LTTE's defeat. But the real significance of Fonseka's candidature is that it marks the direct intervention of the military for the first time into Sri Lankan political life, and a further decay of parliamentary rule.

In opposition to every other candidate, Wijie Dias will be campaigning to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, and behind them the rural masses, in the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government, aimed at refashioning society on socialist lines. The SEP is demanding an immediate end to the military occupation of the North and East, the unconditional release of the tens of thousands of Tamil civilians illegally detained since the end of the war, and the repeal of all repressive laws and emergency regulations.

The SEP warns that whoever wins the election, the next government will unleash a far-reaching assault on the social position and democratic rights of the working class. After promising to bring peace during his 2005 presidential election campaign, Rajapakse plunged the country back to war within months, in order to divide working people and divert attention from mounting social and economic problems.

The war, however, has only compounded the crisis facing the ruling class. Rajapakse mortgaged the country to the hilt to pay for his huge military budgets, but his access to cheap international credit vanished with last year's global financial crisis. The international recession also hit the island's exports. In order to avert an acute foreign exchange crisis, the government was compelled to obtain a \$US2.6 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan.

To fulfil the IMF's severe austerity requirements, Rajapakse has already imposed a freeze on pay and jobs across the public sector and begun further privatisations. Far worse is to come. The IMF is demanding a drastic reduction in the budget deficit from 9 percent to 7 percent of GDP this year, followed by another 2 percent cut over the next two years. Rajapakse has attempted to conceal the implications from voters by delaying the 2010 budget until after the election.

The next government will be compelled to make deep cutbacks in public sector jobs and wages, as well as essential services and price subsidies, and to use the full force of the state apparatus to suppress any opposition. Workers have already been given a taste of what is in store. Using the pretext of his bogus "war on terrorism", Rajapakse has maintained the state of emergency. Its real purpose was made clear when he used it last month to outlaw industrial action by workers on the docks and in the state-owned electricity, water and petroleum enterprises, who were demanding a wage rise. The unions, which function as industrial policemen for the government and business, immediately called off the campaign.

While Rajapakse has not hesitated in using police-state measures against the working class, sections of the ruling elite fear that his fragile coalition government is incapable of dealing with the social explosion that is building up. They are turning to General Fonseka—a Bonapartist figure who is not a member of any party and therefore not bound by party discipline and program—to ram through the economic measures required and to ruthlessly suppress all opposition.

Workers should reject with contempt the attempts by Rajapakse and Fonseka to posture as democrats. Both are now accusing each other of the gross abuses of democratic rights carried out by the security forces over the past four years, including the use of death squads to abduct and kill hundreds of people—Tamils, journalists and political opponents. Both are responsible for these and other crimes, despite the fact that they have flatly denied the security forces were in any way involved in extra-judicial killings.

Fonseka has branded Rajapakse "a tin-pot dictator" and taken up the demand of the opposition parties for the abolition of the executive presidency. The general, however, was part of Rajapakse's politico-

military cabal and supported its anti-democratic methods. If Fonseka wins, he will depend on the sweeping powers of the executive presidency to an even greater extent than his predecessor. He has no direct base of support other than the state apparatus, particularly the military, which has swollen to 300,000 personnel and is still growing. The central thrust of the general's campaign is to bring "law and order" and "discipline" to society.

Fonseka's ability to pose as a democrat depends on the support of the UNP, which in turn has relied on the ex-radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP), who have characterised it as the democratic alternative to the Rajapakse regime. Early this year, the NSSP and USP joined with the UNP in its misnamed Platform for Freedom (PFF), promoting the illusion among working people that this conservative bourgeois party, which started and waged the island's civil war, would defend democratic rights and living standards.

While the NSSP and USP have distanced themselves from Fonseka and are standing their own presidential candidates, they are politically responsible for dressing up the UNP in democratic clothes, allowing it to play a key role in Fonseka's campaign. Last week UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe publicly thanked the NSSP and USP for their past support and wished them well in their campaigns. Nothing could be a more damning indictment of the role of opportunist politics in subordinating the working class to one or other section of the ruling class.

The end of the country's disastrous 26-year civil war poses the necessity for the working class to make a fundamental political reorientation and to mobilise independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie on the basis of a socialist perspective. For decades, the Colombo political establishment has whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism as the means for dividing workers along communal lines and shoring up bourgeois rule. The conclusion of the war has not brought peace and prosperity, as Rajapakse claimed, but deepening attacks on living standards and democratic rights.

Tamils workers and youth confront these issues point blank. The crushing of the LTTE was not simply a military defeat, but the outcome of a perspective that lacked any progressive economic or political rationale. The LTTE's answer to official anti-Tamil discrimination was to attempt to carve out a separate capitalist state for the Tamil minority in one part of the small island of Sri Lanka. Its terrorist attacks on Sinhalese civilians were not tactical errors, but the product of its nationalist outlook, which blamed the "Sinhalese people" as a whole for the crimes of the Colombo government. Organically incapable of making any appeal to Sinhalese workers, the LTTE in the final months of the war was reduced to making pathetic calls to the "international community", even as all the major foreign powers were backing Rajapakse.

Since the war has ended, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) that acted as the LTTE's political mouthpiece has increasingly accommodated itself to the Colombo political establishment. It mounted no campaign to demand the immediate and unconditional release of the more than quarter of a million Tamil civilians held in detention centres. Currently it is reportedly debating whether to stand its own presidential candidate or to throw its support behind Rajapakse or Fonseka. Whatever the outcome, the TNA's policies represent the interests of the Tamil ruling elite, not of the Tamil masses. In any showdown with the working class, the TNA will inevitably side with the government in suppressing workers, regardless of their nationality.

The central plank of the SEP's campaign is socialist internationalism.

We call on workers to reject all forms of nationalism and communalism and to fight together for their common class interests. None of the problems confronting the working class in Sri Lanka can be solved on this small island. Global capitalism has plunged the world into its worst economic crisis since the 1930s, heightening national rivalries, militarism and the danger of new wars. Along with its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, the SEP seeks to unify the working class internationally to abolish the anarchic and outmoded profit system and replace it with a world planned socialist economy.

The SEP fights for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the ruling elite. We call on workers to reject the perennial call of the ex-radicals of the USP and NSSP that one or other political representative of the bourgeoisie should be supported as the "lesser evil". Until the working class begins to mobilise independently to fight for its own class interests, it will be forced to accept the intolerable burdens imposed by the ruling class. Only a workers' and farmers' government will be able to take the necessary steps to provide democratic rights for all and to implement socialist policies to meet the pressing needs of working people, rather than the profits of the wealthy few. The SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally.

The SEP candidate, Wije Dias, has devoted his entire adult life to the principled struggle for socialism in Sri Lanka and around the world. He was a founding member of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP's forerunner, in 1968 and became its general secretary after the untimely death of Keerthi Balasuriya in 1987. He is a member of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The SEP will issue an election manifesto detailing its perspective and program. We urge workers, youth and intellectuals to actively support our campaign by attending our public meetings, organising gatherings for Wije Dias to address, helping to distribute our literature and making generous donations to our campaign fund. Above all we urge all those who agree with our political program to join and build the SEP.



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