

Sri Lanka SEP holds successful meeting in Jaffna

Our our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka held a successful meeting on January 17 in Jaffna, the capital of the Tamil-majority Northern Province. The meeting was addressed by the party's candidate for the January 26 presidential election, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias.

More than one hundred people, including workers, fisherman, university students and housewives attended. Many in the audience were youth and half of the participants were women. This participation points to important changes taking place among the Tamil masses. They are looking for an alternative perspective in the context of the bankruptcy of Tamil nationalism as thoroughly exposed in last year's military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, have conducted work in the Northern Province since the late 1960s, including during the communal war. However, because of the massive military presence, state-sponsored attacks on government opponents, and the LTTE's persecution of its socialist opponents, it was impossible for the SEP to convene public meetings and otherwise conduct open political work.

T. Sambandan, a longstanding member of the SEP, chaired the meeting. He said that in opposition to the 21 other presidential candidates, SEP candidate Wije Dias is advancing a programme for the workers and toilers based on international socialism.

Sambandan added, "President Mahinda Rajapakse has called this election two years early to strengthen his hands to implement the austerity measures of the IMF. He is on record using emergency laws against port, petroleum and power workers that started protests to demand higher wages".

Sambandan explained that all of the Tamil parties that claim to defend the Tamils have rallied behind one or the other of two main candidates—Rajapakse and former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka. Both were leaders of the brutal, communal war that killed thousands of innocent people, displaced hundreds of thousands and culminated with the detention of a significant section of the Tamil population in concentration camps.

Next speaker M. Murugananthan, a fisherman and SEP member, said, "We have not entered this election to win a few votes. We have no false hope that our candidate will become President. We have entered this election to discuss the SEP perspective with the people and win new cadres to the party. Building the party is crucial as the world crisis is developing and its advanced expression can already be seen in Sri Lanka. The working class needs a revolutionary leadership for coming battles".

Wije Dias delivered the main speech at the meeting. He began by explaining what he had seen as he passed through the Vanni, the former LTTE stronghold, to reach Jaffna on the newly opened A-9 road. "You cannot see a single house standing upright along this road. For kilometer after kilometer you can see only the toilets still standing without the adjacent dwellings. They have disappeared. What happened to the occupants, the men, women and children of those houses? Nobody has given any account."

"Those who have started to return to their habitats, after many years of displacement, find that their lands have been seized for the use of the military. They are forced to live in temporary huts covered by polythene sheets provided by the aid agencies.

"These are the blood-soaked marks left on the landscape by the 26 year-long anti-Tamil war. The SEP denounces this atrocity as the only organization that consistently opposed the war. From the very beginning, we characterized it as a war of the Colombo elite and not of the Sinhala people and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the military from the north and the east."

The speaker then recalled how he himself as a member of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) had visited Jaffna and addressed more than a dozen public meetings before 1985 during various struggles of workers, fishermen and university students. It was in order to prevent the unification of the struggles of the Sinhala and Tamil working people and youth that President J.R. Jayawardene launched the war in 1983, as he was introducing open market policies aimed at integrating the Sri Lankan economy into global capitalist production. During

the ensuing quarter century, the communal war was used as the pretext and means to savagely suppress class struggles in both the Tamil-majority north and the Sinhala-majority south.

The ending of the war in May last year has not brought relief to any section of the island's ordinary people. Democracy has not been reinstated nor is there any sign of the prosperity promised by the Rajapakse government. While the north and east continue to be occupied by the military, the emergency laws are used against all sections of the population that protest against job losses, subsidy cuts and price increases.

Dias point to the continuing difficulties experienced by the Tamil masses: "Thousands of internally displaced people live without even basic facilities. The harassment against them continued. The *Nagenahira Navodaya* (Dawn of the East) and *Uthuru Wasanthaya* (Northern Spring) development plans announced by the President Rajapakse are a fraud and will bring no prosperity or democracy for these people. Military suppression continues. Prices of essentials are continuing to go up. The youth face rampant unemployment. When workers and the youth come into struggle, they are met with baton charges and tear gas. The increasing election violence is a warning to the working class and the youth that the incoming government will unleash unprecedented violent attacks against them."

Dias spoke of the significance of last September's protests by 500,000 plantation workers in opposition to the trade unions' sell-out of their struggle for decent wages. He said it was the first shot of an incipient working class offensive.

Only the SEP intervened in the plantation workers' struggle to offer an alternative program based on the independent interests of the working class. The SEP called for the building of workers' action committees independent of the trade unions to develop an anti-capitalist political offensive in defence of worker rights and against the communal politics of the entire Sri Lankan elite. Workers were attracted to this proposal. Dias explained how workers at the Balmoral estate at Agarapathana in Nuwara-Eliya district organized the first action committee with the political help of the SEP. Their appeal, which was addressed to other plantation workers and the entire working class, has received significant support including from urban workers.

Dias explained that Rajapakse's calling of the presidential election two years earlier than scheduled was so as to prepare the way for the implementing of drastic austerity measures.

"But powerful sections of the ruling elite and big business think that they need an even more ruthless and stable government. Sarath Fonseka, who wields the support of the military, is promoted by those sections to deal with the situation.

"Whoever comes to power after January 26, the Sinhala and Tamil working people," warned Dias, "will face a more ruthless autocratic bourgeois rule in this country."

"The only viable alternative is that offered by the SEP. We rejected the bourgeois national separatist program of the LTTE

and called for a united struggle of the Sinhala and Tamil workers and the oppressed against the war and the reactionary Sri Lankan state. It was to forge that class unity against both Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisie that we raised the demand for the withdrawal of troops from the north and east. The LTTE represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie and therefore, like the Sinhala elite, was bitterly opposed to such a unity of the working people.

"Now the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) which was the mouthpiece of the LTTE has lined up behind Fonseka and peddles the fraud that the democratic rights of the Tamil people can be assured under his rule. The SEP calls on Tamil people to reject the reactionary maneuvers of the TNA.

"K. Sivajilingam [a TNA dissident leader who is standing as an independent] has struck a vote-sharing agreement with Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne—an incorrigible opportunist who has a history of supporting bourgeois parties and their communal politics stretching back to the early 1960s. In his latest political acrobatics, Karunaratne, along with United Socialist Party (USP) leader Siritunga Jayasuriya, joined hands with United National Party leader Ranil Wickramasinghe on the 'Platform of Freedom'.

"Under decaying capitalism, neither the economic nor the democratic demands of the masses can be fulfilled. This is why the working class must fight for international socialism. In Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil workers must unite with their international class brothers for the establishment of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. This is the program," said Dias in concluding his speech, "we offer at this election and we call on those in attendance at this meeting to study it and join the SEP to build it as a mass revolutionary party."

A lively question-and-answer session followed. Among the questions raised were: what is the SEP position on war crimes, how can those who committed war crimes in Sri Lanka be punished, and what is the meaning of the SEP's call for a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam?

Participants donated 4000 rupees to the SEP election fund. This is the equivalent of nearly a month's wages for a worker and constitutes a significant sum when one considers the extremely difficult circumstances facing people in the military-ravaged Jaffna region.



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