

SEP presidential candidate speaks in southern Sri Lankan city

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a public meeting on January 3 in the major southern city of Galle as part of its campaign for the January 26 presidential election. About 40 workers, youth, small business owners and housewives participated in the meeting, which was also covered by reporters from the state-owned television channels, Rupavahini and ITN, and the privately-owned Sirasa and Swarnavahini channels.

Prior to the meeting, the party campaigned for its candidate, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, among the city's working people and youth [[Click here](#)].

Opening the meeting, Ratnasiri Malalagama, an SEP political committee member, emphasised that the SEP was the only party advancing a socialist alternative for the working class, against all the capitalist candidates and their opportunist supporters.

Malalagama referred to an issue that had emerged numerous times during the SEP's campaigning: wouldn't opposition candidate General Sarath Fonseka provide "a change" from President Mahinda Rajapakse's oppressive and corrupt rule? Fonseka is being backed by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the United National Party (UNP) and their allies.

"The JVP, the UNP and Fonseka spread illusions about cleansing society of the corruption of the Rajapakse government," he said. "But there is no corruption-free capitalism. This UNP-JVP campaign has been aimed at covering up the disastrous record of the civil war, conducted jointly by Rajapakse and Fonseka, and the roots of the present political and economic crisis."

Since independence, the Sri Lankan capitalist class had used communal politics to divide the working class along ethnic lines in order to pursue its profit interests and maintain its rule, Malalagama pointed out. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working people alike had to reject this communalism and unite on socialist policies.

Presidential candidate Wije Dias began by explaining that the aim of the SEP's election campaign was to present the socialist alternative for the Sri Lankan, South Asian and international working class. He stressed that the SEP was based on an international socialist program and was campaigning for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies.

"This is a stand in opposition to all the other parties that falsely promise this or that bandaid to make capitalism work without corruption, nepotism and repression," Dias explained. "Capitalist rule has to be overthrown and a socialist transformation of the society undertaken in order to achieve the democratic and social aspirations of the workers and the poor".

Dias observed that both President Rajapakse's government and the opposition parties that back General Fonseka were promising to bring "peace and prosperity" as a result of their victory in the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"Both these camps asked the people to sacrifice for the war and shelve their demands for higher wages, jobs and social benefits until the war was over. Now almost eight months have passed since the LTTE was militarily defeated. What have the people received? They find their wages eroded by inflation, jobs lost due to factory closures and subsidies cut as budget allocations are restrained."

The candidate explained that the SEP had always insisted that the civil war was a means to divide ordinary people along communal lines and suppress their social and political struggles. The 26-year war had continued the entrenched chauvinist policy of the ruling elite, which sought to impose the cheap labour conditions needed to integrate the country into the global capitalist market.

"What we see today is a global recession of unprecedented scale. Under these conditions, nationalism and chauvinism are being intensified at every level all over the world. The tariff wars that have already begun between the US and China and other major powers could lead to another world war."

Dias warned about the blatant violations of basic democratic rights in the wake of the war. “The government and the military incarcerated around 300,000 Tamils in concentration camp-style detention centres as soon as the war was over. All Tamils were treated as terrorist suspects. The government’s campaign of intimidation and terror is part of its attempt to abolish the fundamental democratic rights of all working people.

“Rajapakse has already reduced the parliament to a mere rubber-stamp,” Dias pointed out. “Major government decisions are made by a cabal consisting of his brothers, a handful of top executives and the military leaders. If elected, Fonseka would not take a step backward but would go forward towards a military-police state.”

Fonseka was seeking to exploit the opposition of the masses to the Rajapakse regime by making false promises to abolish the executive presidency and bring democracy. “In reality, backed by the discredited UNP and the JVP, but not a member of any party, Fonseka is based directly on the military. He is emphasising his devotion and commitment to its welfare,” Dias explained. “He has emerged as a Bonaparte to arbitrate over social and political issues and ruthlessly suppress political opposition in order to maintain the capitalist profit system against the aspirations of the majority of the population.”

Dias said that ex-radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP) were barriers to workers and youth fighting for their political independence from the capitalist parties. NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratne and USP leader Siritunga Jayasuriya had both begun their political lives as members of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which had betrayed the working class by joining the capitalist government of Madam Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964.

Although the two left the LSSP to form the NSSP in 1977 and then parted ways in 1989, with Jayasuriya forming the USP, both had a common policy of insisting that the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of the Bandaranaiques, and now Rajapakse, was the “lesser evil” as compared to the right-wing UNP and that the working people must support the SLFP at whatever cost.

Dias recounted the latest episode in the rightward trajectory of both the NSSP and the USP. As the masses began to move against the Rajapakse government, the two opportunist parties had swung behind the UNP, insisting that it had now become a “lesser evil”. The two parties joined the UNP last year in its so-called Platform of Freedom, promoting the myth that the UNP would defend democratic rights.

“After our exposure of this despicable act, Karunaratne publicly said it was a mistake to join the UNP’s ‘Platform for Freedom’,” Dias said. “He did not explain, however, why it was a ‘mistake’. This silence is not accidental. There have been long series of such ‘mistakes’. Both the NSSP and USP are incorrigible opponents of the political independence of the working class. Their life-long efforts are directed at tying the working class to this or that party of the bourgeoisie.”

Dias explained that the SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), had an unbroken record of implacably fighting for the political independence of the working class. “In opposing the war, we called on the working class to raise the demand for the immediate withdrawal of troops from the north and east as a means to unite and mobilise Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working people against all factions of the ruling elite and communalism, including the separatism of the LTTE. We did not take the path of least resistance, nor do we take that path now.”

Dias concluded: “Only our program for a united socialist state of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a socialist federation of South Asia and internationally can provide solutions to the economic, social and democratic issues faced by the people. We fight for this program internationally because no socialist solution can be found on the basis of the decadent nation-state system. Our election campaign is directed toward an international audience through the *World Socialist Web Site*. We appeal to all working people to read and study our program, and join the SEP.”



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