

Sri Lanka: SEP candidate addresses plantation workers

Our correspondent
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Wije Dias, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) presidential candidate, addressed a public meeting in Hatton town in Sri Lanka's central plantation district last Sunday. Around 50 workers, teachers and youth participated after SEP teams campaigned among workers at tea plantations in Agarapathana, Maskeliya, Bogawanthalawa, Kotagala and Watawala. Thousands of SEP election manifestos and other political material were distributed.

A. Shanthakumar, who chaired the meeting, said the election was being held at a critical juncture in Sri Lankan politics. Although the civil war was over, the crisis of capitalist rule and the economy had deepened. The ruling elite was sharply divided over which candidate could best impose its economic agenda on working people—incumbent President Mahinda Rajapakse or ex-army chief General Sarath Fonseka. Neither Rajapakse nor Fonseka represented the interests of workers, young people and the oppressed.

Introducing the SEP candidate, the chairman explained that the Socialist Equality Party was the only one fighting to mobilise the working class independently of all factions of the ruling class on the basis of a socialist program. Some people, Shanthakumar explained, said there were three left candidates—referring to the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party. But these ex-radicals, he said, were left satellites of the Colombo political establishment, seeking to tie workers to one or other faction of the bourgeoisie.

Wije Dias began by reminding plantation workers that he had addressed a meeting in Hatton in October amid the

sell-out deal by the trade unions that imposed another two years of poverty-level wages. “At that time SEP warned that workers could not defend their living conditions and other rights through the trade unions. This warning has been proven correct. When workers came onto the streets protesting against the betrayal, the SEP explained that such protests were not enough to defeat the betrayal and win their rights.”

Dias said it was necessary for workers to mobilise independently on the basis of a fundamentally different political orientation. “We called for a struggle for socialist policies and the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government as part of the international struggle against capitalism. We urged workers to form their own action committees independent of the trade unions to carry out this struggle. Workers at the Balmoral Estate at Agarapathana formed an action committee. It was an important first step that needs to be taken further.”

Dias explained that the SEP was contesting the election to prepare workers, youth, poor peasants and students for the political battles ahead. Whether Rajapakse or Fonseka won, the problems facing working people would only worsen. The next government would resort to the same police-state measures used during the war to suppress opposition to its economic onslaught on living standards.

“Rajapakse boasts about ending the 26-year war. He promised prosperity after the war,” Dias said. “What have people got now? Real wages are going down continuously. Prices are increasing. Poor farmers cannot sell their produce. Hundreds of thousands of students who passed their advanced level exams are joining the unemployment queue. When they protest and demand jobs, they are attacked by police. Nothing will be solved

for the working class under Fonseka, for all his numerous promises. Both Rajapakse and Fonseka are militarists who will not hesitate to implement the economic agenda of the corporate elite.”

Dias pointed out that Rajapakse was boasting about his 40-year history in politics and comparing it with the short record of his rival General Fonseka, whose entire career had been in the military. However, the records of both men were not so different. Like the military man Fonseka, Rajapakse’s political record was part of the blood-soaked history of the Sri Lanka ruling class.

Rajapakse entered parliament in 1970 as part of the coalition government under Sirima Bandaranaike with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Stalinist Communist Party. This government unleashed the military against the 1971 uprising, killing at least 15,000 rural Sinhala youth. Rajapakse came from Hambantota in the far south where the fiercest attacks took place. He was prominent in defending the police killings—including a well-known case involving the death of a beauty queen.

Rajapakse was part of the coalition when it drew up the communal constitution in 1972 that maintained Sinhala as the only official language and made Buddhism the state religion. In 1973, the Bandaranaike government introduced so-called standardisation of tertiary education, which discriminated against Tamil students wanting to enter universities. It also intensified the repatriation of Tamil plantation workers to Tamil Nadu under the Indo-Lanka agreement. These discriminatory measures heightened communal tensions and contributed to the subsequent eruption of war in 1983. This was all part of the record that Rajapakse boasted about.

Dias contrasted the history of the SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), which had implacably fought for the interest of the working class since its inception. “I am a founding member of the RCL, which was formed in 1968. We entered politics in the early part of 1966 in a political fight against the LSSP, which first joined the Bandaranaike government in 1964.

“We denounced the LSSP’s decision to join the bourgeois coalition as a great betrayal. That is completely correct, as history has proved. We did not stop there and probed to the source of the betrayal, which lay in the

abandonment of the struggle for Trotskyist principles by Pabloite opportunism—a tendency that emerged within the Fourth International after World War II. We formed the RCL as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which fought Pabloism.

“Those political foundations have been the basis waged by the RCL and SEP against the disasters, injustices and murderous attacks of the ruling class on workers in which Rajapakse had a role”. Dias explained that workers and youth needed to learn the political lessons of the long struggle for principle by the SEP and the ICFI to prepare for the battles ahead.

“We are entering a new period of great class struggles as the capitalist crisis deepens,” Dias concluded. He urged workers and youth to join the SEP and to build it as a mass party to lead the working class not only in Sri Lanka but throughout the South Asia.

Workers and youth stayed behind to have informal discussion with the speakers and other SEP members. All were disgusted with the other candidates.

Selvaraj, a young worker, told the WSW: “Both Rajapakse and Fonseka are lying. Fonseka is saying he will give us a 10,000-rupee salary increase. Is that possible? Both are accusing each other of corruption. The meeting was very helpful in understanding the election. In this situation where we can’t vote for these main candidates, I think it is good to have program to unite the working class.”

Another worker, Senthivel, explained: “One of your members used to contact me and give me leaflets. We think your politics is genuine. Wije Dias explained very well what the government is doing and how the situation is moving. I think we need such a socialist party.”



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