

SEP campaigns in Jaffna

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters won a strong response when they campaigned among workers, fishermen, war refugees, university students and youth on the northern Jaffna peninsula to build a January 17 election meeting in Jaffna town. They distributed about 10,000 copies of the manifesto issued by the SEP and its presidential candidate, the party's general secretary Wije Dias.

The Jaffna peninsula used to be the main intellectual and cultural centre of Tamils. But it has been devastated by the 26-year communal war conducted by successive Colombo governments. Many houses were destroyed and tens of thousands of people were killed, injured or became refugees. Fertile areas, with farms and vineyards, were declared high security zones and the residents forced to leave.

In 1981, pro-government thugs burned down the Jaffna Library, which was considered one of the finest in South Asia. Its collection comprised more than 95,000 Tamil books as well as irreplaceable manuscripts and ola (dried palm) leaf documents. All the books were destroyed.

Even though the military conflict ended with the crushing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on May 18, the Sri Lankan military still occupies the peninsula and violates basic democratic rights.

SEP campaigners spoke to hundreds of people at the Jaffna central bus stand and Jaffna University. They also campaigned in the surrounding areas of Gurunagar, Ariyalai, Karainagar, Moolai, Chulipuram, Panagam, Sithankeni, Chankanai, Sandilipai Manipay, Punguduthivu, Kayts and Chunnagam.

The principled struggle of the SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), was appreciated. For many years, the party

campaigned under difficult conditions for the political independence of the working class against both the Sinhala chauvinism of the Colombo political establishment and the bourgeois nationalist perspective of the LTTE.

A young worker at Jaffna University, who had read the SEP manifesto, said: "Any party who puts out this kind of manifesto has to be a good one. We have suffered a lot during the 26 years of war. We have many bad experiences. All the political parties supported the Colombo government or the LTTE. They are discredited now. I think your party will get support from the people. I am very happy to see you."

Apart from the Sri Lankan civil war, questions were raised about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the character of China. One final year management student asked about emerging capitalism of China. After the discussion, he said he now had some understanding about what had happened in Russia and China. "Previously we heard only about Lenin's differences with Trotsky. But now we understand what Trotskyism means. We want more discussion on this."

A final year political science student said: "Your manifesto explained well how to solve the Tamil national problem. One has to unite the Tamil and Sinhala masses and call for a constituent assembly elected by the masses." The student requested that the *World Socialist Web Site* write more about the country's political prisoners. He said more than 10,000 innocent Tamil people had been arrested as "LTTE suspects" and some were even children under 15 years of age.

One SEP team campaigned on Punguduthivu, an island to the west of the Jaffna peninsula. About 500 families had been re-located there after being detained since the end of the war in the vast military-run Manik Farm camp near the northern town of Vavuniya.

Post-war detainees accused all the main political parties of being responsible for what happened to them. They had no confidence in either the incumbent Mahinda Rajapakse and former general, Sarath Fonseka, the opposition's "common candidate".

One said: "No one has spoken about the problems we face. We have been settled in damaged houses that were abandoned. The government has given us no land or anything to settle permanently. We are not allowed to go to the Vanni where our land and houses are located. We don't have proper jobs or freedom.

"If the authorities suspect anyone, even without the slightest evidence, the navy's public relations officer takes away their birth certificate and identity-card. Every Sunday they have to go to the navy office and sign in. Whoever wins the election, none of our problems will be solved. Because of that, we are not interested in the election."

During the 1980s, fishermen, farmers and small businessmen lived in these areas, but faced continual harassment due to the war. Most people left the island after it was occupied by the Sri Lankan army in 1990. Just a one-third of the population remains.

Water is a severe problem. The regional council, the non-government agency Sarvodaya and the Co-Op society provide water through bowsers, but people must pay 15 rupees for 45 litres. Even then the water is not provided daily—only every three or four days.

One young woman who was previously detained at Manik Farm said: "We can't believe Rajapakse or Fonseka. Both are responsible for the unbearable difficulties we faced during the war. Both the SLFP [Sri Lanka Freedom Party] and the UNP [United National Party] are responsible for the war. We have been displaced from our native places.

"All the Tamil parties are now behind these two candidates. Sarath Fonseka is the former army commander. If he becomes president, he will rule the country in a military way. The leaders of the TNA [the Tamil National Alliance, a coalition of Tamil parties that previously supported the LTTE] work only for their selfish interests. People did not get any benefit from them."

Though the young woman previously knew nothing

about the SEP, she said the discussion was very interesting. She promised to read the SEP manifesto and attend the public meeting in Jaffna.

Another worker, employed by a non-government organisation, said the SEP was the only party genuinely representing the interests of the Tamil masses. "This is for thinking people," he commented. He added that the LTTE's military debacle had revealed the political bankruptcy of the entire Tamil establishment.

"Now the political vacuum among the Tamil people should be replaced by a socialist program. The TNA's politics always defended a capitalist program and helped capitalist governments. Now the Tamil people have started to think. Your program will get support."

A teacher said: "Both the main parties, the SLFP and the UNP, have played with the lives of Tamil people. Now the TNA is helping them." He thought the SEP's socialist program was good but commented: "I don't know how it will come to reality."

Fishing is now the main livelihood in the Punguduthivu area. There are no other job opportunities, and many young people are unemployed.

One young man said he had studied to A-level at school but was now fishing, like many youth in the area. "We have no proper jobs. We are fishing in a very primitive way. We also face difficulties selling the fish. If we had fibreglass boats we could go to sea and catch more fish."

The young man held both Rajapakse and Fonseka responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent people. "But now the TNA is supporting Fonseka. This exposes their real politics," he said.



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