

Sri Lanka elections: SEP campaigns for Hatton meeting

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members campaigned among visited plantation workers and youth to build the party's January 9 public meeting in Hatton for the presidential elections. SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board, is the party's presidential candidate. Hatton is a town in the island's central plantation districts.

It took two bus journeys, and 1.5 hours, for the campaign team to travel the 25 kilometres from Hatton to Glenugie Estate in Up-Cot. A young worker commented: "Governments have changed every six years. But the conditions of plantation workers have not improved; they have even worsened. Under [President Mahinda] Rajapakse the cost of living has increased rapidly. One kilogram of rice is 85 rupees. The government claims rice is available at 55 rupees per kilo at co-operative shops. It is a lie."

The worker was a member of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), a trade union that also functions as a political party among plantations. He bitterly explained: "These union leaders only visit us during elections. They are working for themselves, not for us. We can vote for neither Rajapakse nor [his main rival General Sarath] Fonseka. Both are responsible for killing Tamil people during the war. As you said, workers must build an independent political party based on a socialist program."

The young worker's home was a 3-metre x 3-metre single room in a line of such rooms. These buildings are simply known as "lines". The front part of each room had been separated for use as a kitchen. Although electricity was available, there was no water tap nearby.

The young worker also complained about the lack of toilet facilities.

The SEP team spoke to a group of workers in front of another line. Periyasamy, 72, a retired worker, had read the SEP's election statement and agreed with it. "Your party spends money to print this type of leaflet to educate workers. But these plantations unions collect lots of money from us as union subscriptions and do nothing for workers," he said. "I know your party is circulating leaflets among us not only during elections but also during plantation workers' strikes. I think the younger generations will follow your policies."

"I can remember in the 1950s how the LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party) fought for workers' rights courageously. At that time, the plantation management was afraid because of the LSSP's fight. Now the trade unions are very closely collaborating with the management," he said.

The LSSP, a former Trotskyist party, degenerated along nationalist line in the 1950s and joined a bourgeois coalition government led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964, completely betraying the working class.

Another worker, 45, said: "We are living as second-class citizens. I went to Batticaloa (in the Eastern Province) for work. As I returned home I was arrested in Nawalapitiya (32 kilometres from Hatton). The only reason was that I am a Tamil. I have been arrested four times in this way. Now the war is over, but many people are still detained. Whoever wins the elections—Rajapakse or Fonseka—I don't think our problems will be solved."

The team then went to Dunkelled Estate near the Castle Reigh dam. The trip involved a five-kilometre bus ride from Hatton, followed by a risky reservoir crossing in a primitive boat made from a tree trunk. Workers' homes were also line rooms. Electricity was not available, nor had management provided any water supply. Some workers had arranged ad hoc water systems at their own expense. The lack of sanitation was a major issue—workers had to use open spaces near the dam as toilets.

Dunkelled is a privately-owned estate, not covered by the sellout collective agreement recently signed between the unions and plantation companies. Dunkelled workers receive even less than the poverty-level wage of 405 rupees (\$US3.50) a day set by the agreement.

Ratnam, 65, a retired worker, had worked at Dunkelled estate since his teenage years. Because his parents were CWC members he also joined it. "Since 1977, CWC officials have come and told us to vote, and we have voted accordingly. Up to now, there has been no change in our lives. Whenever there is an election, various people come here and promise various things. But we are living in the same line rooms built 80 years ago."

Ratnam continued: "We have no transport facilities to reach the main road. Either we have to walk six kilometres or use the boat to cross the dam, which is risky. Even to transport a patient to hospital we have to do it the same way.

"Whenever union leaders join a government they praise its leader as the one and only leader who understands and can solve our problems. During my lifetime they told us that several times, but no one has solved our problems. This time, we were thinking of tearing up the ballots. We have doubts about you too because of our bitter experiences with the other parties. But you speak the same as you did during the last provincial council elections. So we can think about you."

Sivan, 45, described his experiences working at a

hotel in Colombo. "After the last presidential elections in 2005 I could no longer work in Colombo as there were routine round ups by security forces. I had to return here, but then I found that even this estate was being searched.

"I have no work now and I'm doing daily odd jobs to survive. It is very difficult to manage for my family with the high cost of living. We rarely eat good vegetables. We cannot think about eating meat. Mostly we manage with some green leaves and dhal curry."

SEP members also visited the Balmoral estate in Agarapathana, where workers last year formed their own action committee, independent from all the trade unions, with the SEP's political guidance and assistance. We began a discussion with a group of workers when they lined up to submit their loads of tea leaves at midday.

One worker immediately declared: "Whoever wins this election will not solve our problems." Another blamed the government for its failure to increase their salaries to meet the skyrocketing food prices. "We have to change this government," he said.

The discussion was cut short after 10 minutes. A supervisor arrived and warned workers that if they did not return to work immediately he would not enter their names in the register as having worked that day.



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