

SEP manifesto for the 2010 Sri Lankan presidential election

A socialist program to fight for social equality and democratic rights

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers and youth to support our candidate Wije Dias and participate in our campaign for the January 26, 2010 presidential election in Sri Lanka. Dias, 68, is SEP general secretary and a member of the World Socialist Web Site International Editorial Board. He has devoted his entire adult life to fighting for revolutionary Marxism.

There is one overriding question facing working people in this election: what is there to show for 26 years of civil war between the government and the Tamil-separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)? There are 70,000 dead, hundreds of thousands more displaced or imprisoned in concentration camps, millions remain in poverty, and bitter tensions persist between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. This is the terrible price of the irresponsible communalist politics of the Sri Lankan ruling class.

The leading presidential candidates, President Mahinda Rajapakse and General Sarath Fonseka, have presided over war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights. Rajapakse restarted the conflict in July 2006, and General Fonseka prosecuted it. The military killed thousands of civilians in its indiscriminate bombardments and, after the LTTE's collapse, incarcerated 280,000 men, women and children. Hundreds have been abducted or killed by death squads that have operated throughout the island with the complicity of the security forces.

Rajapakse has mortgaged the island to the hilt to pay for the war. As soon as the election is over, the government will be compelled to make huge cuts to public spending to meet the terms of the country's International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan. It will use the police-state methods developed during the civil war to suppress the inevitable growth of political opposition.

The SEP is campaigning to mobilise the working class, in opposition to all the representatives and apologists for the bourgeoisie. We fight for a workers' and farmers' government in the form of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of a socialist federation of South Asia and the entire globe.

The bankruptcy of communalism

Nothing will be solved by a temporary peace that has been achieved through war crimes and the oppression of national minorities. The government's brutality in prosecuting the civil war only ensures that communal tensions and conflicts will erupt in new forms.

An entire generation has grown up knowing nothing but war and police state repression. All attempts at securing peace through power-sharing arrangements have foundered on the communal politics that has formed the basis of bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka since independence 60 years ago. The "solution" offered by Rajapakse and Fonseka entails the permanent military occupation of the North and East, and police-state measures throughout the island.

Likewise, the end of the war delivers a crushing verdict on the LTTE's perspective of building a separate Tamil capitalist state in northern Sri Lanka. Its ethnic-based program left it unable to appeal to the Sinhalese workers—let alone the workers of Tamil Nadu or other areas of India—and underlay its bloody terrorist attacks on Sinhalese civilians. The LTTE's anti-democratic character, which was expressed in its ruthless suppression of all political opposition, only alienated the Tamil masses and ultimately led to the loss of their support.

The LTTE's politics left it exposed to shifts in the political winds, especially the bogus US declaration of a "war on terror" after the attacks of September 11, 2001. As India and the US became increasingly concerned by rising Chinese influence in Sri Lanka and the Indian Ocean, the major powers concluded that the Sri Lankan war was no longer in their interests. They all assisted as Rajapakse seized upon the LTTE's terrorist attacks to justify his own ruthless "war on terror" against the LTTE.

Great power rivalry in South Asia

The end of the Sri Lankan civil war will not bring peace. Rather, it constitutes a warning of the enormity of the crisis in world politics, which will only bring further conflicts throughout the region and the world. International relations have been profoundly destabilised by the irresolvable contradictions of the capitalist system, which found their expression in the global financial crisis that erupted in September 2008.

The US response is typified by the Obama administration's recent

announcement of a surge of troops in Afghanistan, and its pressure on Pakistan to escalate attacks against Islamic insurgents. Behind the bogus façade of a “war on terror,” the US is seeking to establish a strategic position in the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East to maintain its role as arbiter of world politics against its chief rivals—especially China. Its aggressive militarism, unpopular at home and abroad, is destabilising the entire Indian subcontinent, already torn by religious and ethnic antagonisms.

The Sri Lankan civil war was concluded in this context. Rajapakse played off the major powers against one another. He relied heavily on Chinese arms, financial support and diplomatic assistance against US and European calls for war crimes investigations. In return, he has given preferential treatment to Chinese investment, including in a key port facility in Hambantota. Fears of rising Chinese influence in Sri Lanka played an important role in the decision by India and the US to back Rajapakse in his renewed war.

Rajapakse’s manoeuvres have only drawn Sri Lanka further into the bitter international conflicts tearing at the capitalist world order. A recent US Senate Foreign Relations Committee report emphasised Sri Lanka’s strategic importance, situated at the “nexus” of Indian Ocean sea lanes—between Asia and Europe, the Middle East and Africa. It expressed Washington’s determination not to “lose Sri Lanka” to its rivals. Significantly the report called for the shelving of Washington’s previous humanitarian pretences in favour of “a robust approach” that recognised US geo-strategic realities.

The resurgence of the class struggle

Like their class brothers and sisters worldwide, Sri Lankan workers face a capitalist onslaught on their living standards and rights. In Sri Lanka, the global financial crisis is pounding an economy devastated by the civil war. State debt now stands at 4.1 trillion rupees, over 90 percent of GDP, mainly due to military expenditure.

Growing discontent and anger among workers has led to renewed struggles in the plantations, the ports and the petroleum, electricity and water sectors. In every case the unions, pro-government and pro-opposition alike, have suppressed any independent struggle by their members. They have adamantly opposed any political fight against the Rajapakse government, bowed to its threats and sold out their members.

Rajapakse has deployed troops against striking workers, used his emergency powers to ban industrial action and encouraged repeated attacks on media critics. His post-war “nation building” has accelerated pro-market restructuring and privatisation, aimed at transforming the island into a new cheap labour platform for foreign investors. The next government will seek to slash wage levels and public spending to make the island “internationally competitive”. Such attacks will be particularly fierce, as Asian countries compete for access to Western export markets that have already been devastated by the impoverishment of the working class due to the global economic crisis.

The SEP insists that workers can only defend themselves against poverty and the danger of world war with a socialist strategy for the entire international working class, directed against the profit motive and the

outmoded nation-state system.

In the midst of their pay campaign, plantation workers at the Balmoral estate in Agarapathana formed their own action committee, with the SEP’s political assistance and independently of the trade unions, and appealed to other sections of the working class to take the same stand. Their action represents an important first step by the working class in breaking from the unions and mobilising for a political struggle against the profit system and its defenders.

The SEP’s demands

* For an end to the military occupation of the North and East

The SEP demands an immediate end to the military occupation of the North and East, and the freeing of all detainees, to unify Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers in a common struggle against capitalist rule. To create the basis for a genuine democratic settlement, the SEP calls for the convening of a Constituent Assembly to draw up a new constitution that will settle all outstanding democratic issues. Such an Assembly must be organised and elected by ordinary working people, and must put an end to all discriminatory laws to ensure genuine, democratic rights.

* Secure and well-paid jobs for all

Billions of rupees must be provided for public works, to create hundreds of thousands of well-paid jobs and build public housing, schools, hospitals, cultural and sporting facilities, roads and irrigation schemes. The SEP proposes a vast expansion of jobs by reducing the working week to 30 hours, with no loss of pay and with wages indexed to the cost of living. We advocate an end to child labour and the use of women and youth on night shift work. To obtain the necessary resources, we call for the nationalisation of all large banks and financial institutions, and the transformation of all major industrial corporations—including those in the Free Trade Zones—into publicly owned and democratically controlled utilities.

* Free, high-quality education

At present the education system is riven by inequality—children in working-class and rural areas face badly-equipped, understaffed public schools, while the sons and daughters of the wealthy enjoy modern resources, methods and technology in private schools. The SEP advocates a vast expansion of the public school system to provide free, high-quality education, through to university level, to all who wish to pursue their studies. Existing institutions must be upgraded to provide access to scientific laboratories, computer facilities and the latest audio-visual equipment, as well as to sporting and arts facilities.

* For universal health care

Thousands die every year of preventable diseases—dengue, malaria, mumps, and tuberculosis—as new diseases like H1N1 and bird flu spread. Increasingly, those with means use private doctors and clinics, while the masses rely on an underfunded public health system. The SEP calls for the development of well-equipped, properly-staffed public hospitals and clinics to provide free, universal, high-quality health care.

* Decent housing for all

Many families live in substandard houses without basic amenities such as running water, electricity and proper toilet facilities, and face rising rents and eviction campaigns by landlords. The SEP advocates the construction of affordable, rent-controlled public housing, including all essential utilities, to provide decent accommodation for all.

* End the oppression of women workers

Women workers are condemned by poverty to bear a double burden of poorly-paid work and domestic drudgery. They carry out the most onerous labour—in garment factories, tea-plucking, rubber-tapping and other agricultural work. The global economic crisis has provoked layoffs of tens of thousands of women garment workers, and the loss of jobs or income as housemaids or menial workers abroad, as the downturn hits the Middle East.

The SEP defends equal pay and conditions for women workers, including free, high-quality childcare and maternity leave on full pay. We call for the outlawing of gender discrimination, including within marriage laws. Abortion must be legalised and made freely available to all. The SEP strives to promote an enlightened cultural climate, in which men and women alike can fully develop their talents and personalities.

* Help small farmers

Landlessness afflicts most small farmers, and this problem has played a significant role in provoking the civil war. Successive governments deliberately settled the landless Sinhala poor in colonies in majority-Tamil areas, in the northern Wanni area and in the East—exacerbating racial tensions. With the end of the war, these policies are being revived. The SEP calls for the distribution of state land to all landless farmers, regardless of ethnicity. All past debts amassed by poor farmers and fishermen must be cancelled, while loans, farm equipment, fertilisers and chemicals, and fishing gear must be provided on affordable terms.

For the political independence of the working class

A quarter century of civil war in Sri Lanka confirms a basic tenet of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: the organic inability of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development to carry out basic democratic tasks. Only the working class, rallying around it, the oppressed masses in the struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society, can guarantee peace and genuine democratic rights for all. This is possible only on the basis of a fundamental break from all political forces that tie the masses to the bourgeoisie.

Never has the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie stood so politically exposed, as the bourgeois parties line up behind Rajapakse or Fonseka. The ex-left parties—the LSSP and Stalinist Communist Party—are firmly behind Rajapakse, while the JVP's Sinhala chauvinism finds its consummate expression in that party's support, along with the right-wing United National Party, for Fonseka. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—the LTTE's mouthpiece until May—is engaged in grotesque backroom negotiations to see which of the two war criminals will offer the best deal

in return for its support.

The most pernicious role, however, falls to the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP), who are standing Wickramabahu Karunaratne and Siritunga Jayasuriya, respectively. They posture as opponents of the war and supporters of socialism. However, as shown by their long and sordid history of opportunist manoeuvres with the main bourgeois parties, they are organically hostile to independent, working-class politics.

After joining the UNP's bogus "Platform of Freedom" earlier this year, the NSSP and USP now declare that their aim in standing is to prevent Fonseka or Rajapakse from winning in the first round. As they have done in every previous poll, they are preparing to endorse one or other bourgeois candidate as "the lesser evil" if the election should go to a second round. These proponents of electoral cretinism, fully integrated into the political establishment, serve the bourgeoisie as a crucial safety valve for popular discontent.

The struggle for socialism in South Asia

The SEP is grounded on the great principles of international socialism embodied today in the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The ICFI defends the program on which Lenin and Trotsky led the 1917 Russian revolution: the world socialist revolution to liberate mankind from capitalism and class oppression. The Fourth International was founded by Trotsky in 1938 to fight the betrayals of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which usurped political power in the Soviet Union and advanced the anti-Marxist perspective of "socialism in one country," in order to defend its interests as an emerging conservative ruling caste. The final vindication of the Trotskyist movement's opposition to Stalinism came in 1991, when the Stalinists renounced socialism, broke up the Soviet Union, and restored capitalism.

The SEP bases itself on the legacy of the most far-sighted representatives of the proletariat, who continued the struggle for socialist internationalism. In the 1940s, the Trotskyists of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) struck deep roots in the working class of South Asia, developing a democratic and socialist perspective for the working class and oppressed masses of the Indian subcontinent. The subsequent entry of the LSSP into a bourgeois coalition government in 1964 was a major blow against socialism and the unity of the Sri Lankan proletariat.

The RCL, the SEP's forerunner, was founded in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in a direct political struggle against the LSSP's betrayal. Over more than four decades, the RCL and SEP have intransigently opposed bourgeois communalism—the institution of Sinhala as the national language and Buddhism as a state religion, the pseudo-populist Sinhala chauvinism of the JVP, and the LTTE's separatism. It was the only party that consistently opposed the civil war and demanded withdrawal of troops from the North and East. As the class struggle revives throughout South Asia and internationally, the lessons of these struggles will provide essential political guideposts for the working class.

We urge all those who support our program and perspective to actively

participate in our election campaign. This means helping to publicise our candidate and meetings, distributing and discussing our election material and encouraging the widest audience for the *World Socialist Web Site*, the internet publication of the ICFI. Above all, we call on you to join and build the Socialist Equality Party as the mass party of the working class.



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