

SEP stands in Sri Lankan parliamentary election

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is contesting the parliamentary election on April 8 to mobilise the working class against the deepening assault on living standards and democratic rights. The SEP is fighting for a workers' and farmers' government to implement a socialist program to meet the pressing needs of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few.

The SEP is standing slates of candidates in four districts—the capital Colombo, Jaffna in the war-torn north, Nuwara Eliya in the central tea plantation region and Galle in the south. In all, the SEP has 58 candidates, including plantation and industrial workers, teachers, fishermen, housewives, unemployed, students and professionals. The slates are headed by Vilani Peiris, S. Chandrasekaran, M. Devarajah and Ratnasiri Malalagama, all of whom have devoted their entire adult lives to fighting for the interests of the working class.

The election is taking place amid an acute economic and political crisis. Despite the end of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May, living standards have continued to deteriorate sharply. President Mahinda Rajapakse, who promised “peace and prosperity,” has resorted to anti-democratic measures to silence media critics and detain political opponents. He banned industrial action last year by workers seeking a pay rise. Following the January 26 presidential election, the government arrested the main opposition candidate, General Sarath Fonseka, who remains in military detention on vague, trumped-up allegations of planning a coup.

While sharp differences exist between the government and opposition parties, they agree on the fundamental issue: to impose the burden of the economic crisis onto working people. The entire political establishment is attempting to dupe voters into believing that life will be better after the election. The government propagates the lie that there are no economic problems and that Sri Lanka is becoming “the emerging wonder of Asia”. The opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—acknowledge there are difficulties, but falsely claim that a virtual paradise would exist if only government corruption and waste were ended.

The SEP warns that the working class is in for a rude shock. The global economic crisis of capitalism that erupted in 2008 is entering its second stage. The mountains of debt involving trillions of dollars that were taken onto government books in country after country through corporate bailouts and stimulus packages are unsustainable.

As is now the case in Greece, these debts have to be offloaded onto working people, even though they bear no responsibility for the orgy of financial speculation that led to the crisis.

Far from being immune, Sri Lanka is particularly vulnerable to this global economic turmoil. The protracted civil war waged by successive Colombo governments has devastated much of the island. President Rajapakse mortgaged the country to the hilt to pay for his military offensives, resulting in a state debt that stands at over 4 trillion rupees or 90 percent of GDP. Last July, amid the global credit crunch, he was forced to sign a \$US2.6 billion loan with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to avert a severe balance of payments crisis that could have led to a sovereign default.

With the complicity of the Central Bank, the government has deliberately obscured the state of the country's finances. Rajapakse deferred the budget until after the elections. There are no up-to-date figures as to the size of the budget deficit. One estimate puts it at 11.3 percent. The IMF is demanding it be slashed to 5 percent in 2011 and has withheld the latest loan instalment because the government has not met its targets.

The implications of slashing the budget deficit by more than half are already evident in Greece, where the government has imposed a public sector wage freeze, a 20 percent across-the-board cut in civil-service bonuses, a two-year increase in the average retirement age, a higher value added tax and increased taxes on fuel, alcohol and tobacco. The implementation of the “Greek solution” in Sri Lanka will be devastating in conditions where official youth unemployment is already 35.4 percent, 15 percent of the population live below the official poverty line and essential services such as health and education have been slashed.

Rajapakse has declared his intention to wage an “economic war” to rebuild the nation. The SEP warns that he will use the police-state methods built up in the course of the 26-year conflict with the LTTE to ruthlessly suppress any opposition from working people. During the war, the president denounced striking workers and protesting students for undermining national security. He will not hesitate to brand anyone as unpatriotic who resists the imposition of his “nation-building” austerity measures.

Following the presidential election, the government launched a widespread crackdown against Fonseka's supporters and the opposition parties, including in workplaces, the media and the upper

echelons of the military and police. Despite the bitterness of the political infighting, however, the differences between the government and opposition parties are tactical in character—in particular how to orient Sri Lanka's foreign policy amid sharpening great power rivalries.

The historic decline of the US and the rise of new powers such as China and India is profoundly destabilising world politics, especially in South Asia. US President Obama's intensifying war in Afghanistan and proxy war in Pakistan is aimed at extending American influence into the key strategic regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. China, which is reliant on energy and resources from the Middle East and Africa, is intent on securing its trade routes, including through the Indian Ocean. India regards the region as its own sphere of influence.

Sri Lanka is increasingly being swept up in this competition. In the course of his communal war, Rajapakse turned to China for arms, financial assistance and political support, offering economic and strategic opportunities in return, including the construction of a crucial new port facility at Hambantota. Confident of China's support, Rajapakse has rebuffed international criticism of the military's war crimes as a "Western conspiracy". Fonseka, on the other hand, appeared to lean towards Sri Lanka's traditional allies in the US and Europe during the presidential election, criticising Rajapakse for alienating "the international community" and placing EU trade concessions in jeopardy.

Rajapakse's crackdown on Fonseka and the opposition parties is primarily aimed at consolidating his position in preparation for a confrontation with the working class. Despite the end of the war, he has maintained the state of emergency with the support of virtually all parliamentary parties. Pro-government death squads that killed hundreds of people with impunity during the war continue to operate.

During his first term of office, Rajapakse exploited his extensive executive powers to reduce parliament to a rubber stamp. Increasingly, he operated on the basis of a politico-military cabal that included relatives, close advisers, top generals and bureaucrats. President Rajapakse's main interest in the parliamentary election is to secure the two-thirds majority needed to change the constitution at will and consolidate his police-state rule.

Workers should not place any faith in the opposition UNP or JVP, which agree with the Rajapakse regime on every fundamental issue—in particular its communal war to suppress the Tamil minority, and its economic measures to prop up Sri Lankan capitalism. The UNF and JVP backed Fonseka, the general who prosecuted Rajapakse's war, in the presidential election as an alternative autocrat to ram through the agenda demanded by the corporate elite. The UNF and JVP are only able to posture as a democratic alternative to Rajapakse with the assistance of the ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party who have shamelessly lined up with these right-wing parties.

A quarter century of brutal civil war has exposed the reactionary character of all forms of nationalism and communalism. Successive Colombo governments whipped up anti-Tamil hatreds to divide the working class and are responsible for the criminal war that cost the lives of more than 75,000 people. However, the LTTE's program of

Tamil separatism, which represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie not the Tamil masses, was no progressive alternative. The LTTE's military defeat was ultimately a product of its political bankruptcy. It was organically incapable of making any class appeal to the one social force capable of defending the democratic rights of Tamils—the working class.

Workers have to draw the necessary lessons. Their interests cannot be defended through the politics of parliamentary combination and manoeuvre, but only through their own independent mobilisation on the basis of a socialist program that seeks to restructure society as a whole to meet its social needs, not corporate profits. Fundamental to such a struggle is the necessity of uniting workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—in the fight for their common class interests. The SEP calls for the withdrawal of all troops from the war torn North and East of the island.

The SEP is standing in the April 8 election to educate and warn working people about the impending onslaught on living standards and democratic rights and to revive the methods of class struggle that have been suppressed for decades. Our candidates will use the campaign to encourage the formation of action committees in workplaces, working class suburbs and in towns and villages to defend the rights of working people. Such a step requires a complete political break from all the political parties and trade unions that keep the working class tied to the bankrupt profit system.

The working class must face facts: the capitalist system has failed and has nothing to offer mankind but new and more terrible wars, catastrophic climate change and the social impoverishment of the masses. Workers in Sri Lanka can defend their most basic rights only by fighting to rouse the rural masses in the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government—a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam—as part of the broader fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally. We urge workers and youth to study our program and to actively support our campaign by distributing our political material, organising meetings for our candidates to address, donating to our campaign fund and above all joining the SEP.



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