

Sri Lankan election: SEP campaigns at irrigation workers' quarters

Our reporters
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“If [President Mahinda] Rajapakse gets a two-thirds majority [in the April 8 general election] he will use it against the people. It will be a dictatorial rule,” an irrigation engineer told a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign team in Sri Lanka. He was referring to Rajapakse’s appeal to voters to give his ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) a two-thirds majority in parliament.

Voicing a widespread concern, the engineer pointed to the political witch-hunt carried out by the Rajapakse regime since the January 26 presidential election, including attacks on political opponents at workplaces and the arrest of the main opposition presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka. He said the events “show how the government is going to rule the country” and warned: “The government will further increase attacks on workers when they come to struggles on pay and other demands. It will use the emergency laws [extended for another month by parliament on March 9] against those struggles.”

The SEP team was visiting an irrigation workers’ housing scheme in Ratmalana, 15 km south of Colombo, during the party’s campaign for the April 8 election, in which it is running 58 candidates for four districts, including Colombo, the country’s capital. Our team met irrigation workers, some private sector workers, students and housewives. We circulated the SEP’s election announcement and discussed the party’s program and perspectives.

Almost all the workers we spoke to, even those who planned to vote for Rajapakse’s UPFA, expressed disagreement with his appeal for a two-thirds majority, warning it would bring grave dangers for working people.

The Irrigation Department was formed in 1900 by the British colonial administration, with a mission to plan, design, construct, operate and manage major and medium-scale irrigation schemes. Its works related to flood control, drainage and salinity levels. Under the “self sufficient”

economic policy initially maintained by governments after independence in 1948, one of the department’s main responsibilities was maintenance of public irrigation facilities for government farming projects and other farmers.

However, under the “open market” economic policies implemented since 1977, which involve restructuring and privatising public institutions, the government is planning to dismember the department and sell water to farmers. An irrigation worker said: “There is a plan to disintegrate our department under various projects. We haven’t received many details at the moment. The union leaders are telling us about that but are doing nothing to prevent it.”

There are about 300 houses in the Ratmalana scheme. Depending on how the houses are graded, workers pay monthly rents of 500 rupees upward, on top of their electricity and water bills. A worker complained that the department does not maintain the houses properly. “There are no repairs on time. The roofs are leaking. Doors and windows are damaged. Some houses have no running water. Those families have to fetch water from neighbouring houses or a nearby temple. The drainage system and inner roads are damaged. There is no proper garbage disposal system. Many places in the scheme have become mosquito breeding grounds. No matter who comes to power, things will not change.”

Another worker showed a small reservoir of about 1,000 square metres, originally dug to supply water to nearby rice paddy land. Later it was abandoned and became polluted.

Many workers who spoke with us had voted for Rajapakse in the presidential poll, hoping that his government would make concessions to ease their economic burdens. They thought that ending the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last May would provide some relief. Some voiced hostility to the LTTE’s violent attacks on Sinhala civilians. The Rajapakse government had

used that anger to inflame communal tensions, as did the main opposition parties, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP), and the trade unions affiliated to them.

Some had voted for Fonseka as a protest against Rajapakse. However, most said they now have no faith in either man. One worker criticised Rajapakse's pledge of a 2,500-rupee (\$US24) salary increase for public sector workers and other concessions to the people as "just promises". He expressed discontent that there was "no relief for ordinary people although the war is over".

A retired Tamil irrigation worker recalled her bitter experiences of the communal war: "My family was originally from Jaffna [in northern Sri Lanka] but we settled in Colombo more than 30 years ago. [The anti-Tamil pogroms in] 1983 still haunt our minds. We had to flee from place to place to save our lives. My brother-in-law had a business but it was totally destroyed during the riots."

She had worked for the Irrigation Department for more than 30 years. "I worked with Sinhalese workers without any problems. The communal problem was created by politicians. I agree with you that these politicians use communalism to deceive the masses. I don't agree with either the LTTE or the way the government forces crushed it, along with thousands of civilians."

Several female workers and housewives expressed outrage over the skyrocketing cost of living and cuts in public education and the health services. The wife of a worker attached to Abans, a private company marketing household electronic goods and supplying contract workers for various services, said: "How can poor people manage this situation? We have decided not to vote for anyone in this election."

A road construction company worker said he was opposed to both the government and the opposition. He had previously campaigned actively for the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), Rajapakse's party. "I was attacked several times by UNP thugs. Once they stabbed me. I tolerated all these things in the hope that the SLFP would help us. But it is useless. They have cheated us again and again. This time I will not vote for anyone." He invited SEP members to organise a political discussion in the area, and offered to assist.

Several families of retired irrigation workers are living in small wooden huts besides the housing scheme because they cannot afford to even rent a house. Upon retirement, they

had to vacate their quarters. Some poor landless families are living in similar huts.

A daughter of a retired worker said her family had been there for 15 years. "In every election, politicians come and promise to give us houses or land to build a house. Once the election is over, no one comes until the next election. We have no proper water or health facilities. And we have no permanent income."

Most people living in the wooden huts are doing odd jobs day-to-day. A woman with three children told us: "We live by collecting and selling flowers. You can only earn 200–300 rupees (\$US1.50–2.25) per day. It is not enough. We can't give our children milk or good meals and we can't send them to good schools."

A university student, the son of an irrigation worker, said the government was boasting about development but its projects were designed to provide infrastructure for business and not to improve people's living conditions. "There is a huge inequality in society. While big businesses are profiteering, the masses are suffering. I know that there are some global problems in the economy. However I didn't realise that it has so seriously affected Sri Lanka. When you explained about the decline in exports, etc., it struck me.

"The concept of socialism is new for me. I thought the government had limited resources and it was justifiable that it could not spend a lot on education to build or expand universities and other facilities. So I was under the impression that private universities are justifiable. However, I accept that private universities are there for profits and not for students' well-being."



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