

Sri Lankan SEP holds election meeting on Karainagar Island

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a successful meeting on March 9 in the fishing village of Uori on the island of Karainagar as part of its campaign for the April 8 parliamentary election. About 35 people including youth, fishermen and housewives took part in the two-hour meeting.

Karainagar Island is part of the northern district of Jaffna—about 20 kilometres to the west of Jaffna town. The whole area was placed under the control of the Sri Lankan navy in the protracted war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The military occupation of the district has continued after the LTTE's defeat last May.

Around 5,000 families live on Karainagar Island in the villages of Maruthapesram, Werapity, Thoppukadu, Neelankadu and Uori. Many more have been displaced as a result of the war. In 1991, around 7,000 families had lived there. Most people are poor, living by fishing or farming. Most houses are simple thatched huts.

Chandrarajah, who chaired the meeting, explained: “The SEP is contesting this election to explain to workers the political crisis and the tasks they face. President Mahinda Rajapakse claimed at the end of the war that there would be prosperity in the country. But the people are facing an economic crisis and attacks on their living conditions.”

He explained that the basic democratic rights of hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians were brazenly flouted at the end of the war. “The government and the military herded people who fled from the Vanni area during the last stages of the conflict into detention camps. Now, in the name of ‘rehabilitation’, many of these refugees have been dumped into other areas without even

basic facilities.”

Chandrarajah pointed to the debt crisis unfolding in Greece and Europe and explained that the situation in Sri Lanka was similar. “People are facing unbearable conditions. They will come onto the streets to confront the government over their deteriorating living standards. The SEP is the only party that speaks on behalf of the workers and poor in opposition to the bourgeois parties and that advances a socialist program to face this crisis.”

SEP member Thulasi explained that although the government and opposition parties are bitter rivals they have no differences when it comes to attacking the rights of the working class and poor. Each of these parties falsely tells the people that after the election their life will be better, if only they vote for it. None of these promises is ever kept. The SEP is conducting a campaign to expose these lies and to provide workers with a perspective to defend their rights.

SEP member Jeyamohan told the audience: “There are so many parties contesting this parliamentary election, but they all defend the capitalist system. Against all these parties, the SEP is advancing an alternative socialist program. The TNA [Tamil National Alliance], which operated as the mouthpiece for the LTTE, has split into four. However, none of them represents the interests of the ordinary Tamil people.

“It is important to understand that the LTTE's defeat was fundamentally political—a result of the bankruptcy of its separatist nationalist perspective. The LTTE could not appeal to the working class to defend the democratic rights of the Tamil people because it represented the interests of Tamil elite. The LTTE called on people to put their faith in India, the US and European powers, which

supported the war and the destruction of the LTTE as well.”

Jeyamohan warned: “Sri Lanka is being caught up in the growing competition between the major powers. The US is using its military power to advance its economic and strategic interests by invading Afghanistan and Iraq. Washington is working to encircle China, which it regards as a rising rival. China is developing its own strategy to counter this. The Rajapakse government has developed a close relationship with China and America wants to counter this.”

Jeyamohan explained that the working class can only confront the danger of new wars on the basis of an internationalist perspective. The struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam has to be part of the broader fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally. He called for the unity of Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers and for an end to the Sri Lankan military occupation of the North and East of the island.

T. Chandrasekaran, who heads the SEP’s slate for the Jaffna district, was the final speaker. He began by pointing out that the government’s latest renewal of the state of emergency was not aimed just at keeping tens of thousands of Tamils in detention as “LTTE suspects” but against the whole working class. The war and the emergency, he said, had been used to divide workers and undermine their struggle in defence of their common class interests.

“Sri Lankan capitalism faces a deep crisis. Government debts have been piled up because of the war. It is calculated that every person on the island is indebted to the tune of 200,000 rupees. The government has put off its budget until after the election because it knows it has to implement the IMF austerity demands,” he said.

“The government has to reduce its budget deficit sharply. It is now about 10 percent of GDP and must be reduced by half by next year. To do that, the government will have to cut expenditure and increase taxes placing huge burdens on working people. This is what workers face after the election,” Chandrasekaran explained. He outlined the SEP’s socialist program and urged the audience to join and build the party.

Prior to the meeting, SEP members campaigned house-

to-house among villagers on Karainagar Island.

Tharmarajah, a fisherman, told the WWS: “Your party’s meetings and its perspective is vital to the working class. Unlike other parties, this party struggles for the working class. Other parties come to us at election time and tell us how they will solve the problems of Tamils to get our vote. But your party struggles to unite the working class.

“The TNA worked for the LTTE like an agent. After the LTTE’s defeat, the TNA was ready to talk with the Colombo government. They are only worried about their own interests.”

Selvaratnam explained: “The TNA has never represented Tamils. They always acted for their selfish purposes. So we have no faith in them. When the LTTE was powerful they were with them. I have heard about your party now. But compared with the other political parties, your party’s policies are on behalf of the working class and its interests.

“Many people had been living in detention camps in oppressive conditions. The Rajapakse government has imprisoned them without basic facilities. Those who have been resettled are also living in pathetic conditions. The government has given them no help. None of the other political parties have raised their voices to demand the release of the 10,000 innocent youth being detained as ‘LTTE suspects’.

“I met a person who resettled here from the Vavuniya detention camp. He lives in an open place in a tent provided by the UNHCR [UN High Commissioner for Refugees]. Four people live in that tent. No one can even stand up straight inside. He told me: ‘See our plight. We were resettled but the government has not helped us. We have no money to even buy drinking water. Government aid is meagre. We have no job. The government has no interest in us, so why would we bother about the election’.”



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