

SEP manifesto for the 2010 Sri Lankan general election

For socialist policies and a workers' and farmers' government

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
25 March 2010

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers and youth to support our candidates and actively participate in the party's campaign for the April 8 general election. The SEP is standing election slates in the districts of Colombo, Jaffna, Nuwara Eliya and Galle.

The SEP is the only party advancing a socialist program to defend the living conditions and democratic rights of working people. We warn that workers face a social and economic disaster unless they break from the capitalist parties, mobilise independently and begin to fight for a workers' and farmers' government and socialist policies.

The political and media establishment is attempting to lull voters into a false sense of security by obscuring the extent of the present economic crisis and the advanced character of the government's police state measures. Once the election is over, President Mahinda Rajapakse will launch a far-reaching onslaught on the living standards of working people and ruthlessly suppress any opposition.

Rajapakse falsely claimed that the end of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would bring a new era of peace and prosperity. In fact, the island's economic and political turmoil has only intensified following the LTTE's defeat. It is intersecting with the new stage of the global economic crisis.

In 2008–09, amid the greatest financial breakdown since the 1930s, governments around the world took trillions of dollars in private debt onto their books through bailouts, stimulus packages and financial guarantees. Now the corporate elites are demanding that these massive debts be offloaded onto working people.

The immediate focus is Greece, where finance capital is insisting the Papandreou government cut wages, lift the pension age, increase taxes, slash spending on education, health and welfare—in short, impoverish the working class—to pay for the speculation and swindling of the world's financial aristocracy. Greece, however, is just a test case for the agenda to be implemented throughout Europe and internationally.

The same processes are very advanced in Sri Lanka. President Rajapakse borrowed heavily to pay for his war, leading to the doubling of government debt to 4.1 trillion rupees (\$US36 billion) or 86 percent of GDP between 2005 and 2009. Last year, the budget deficit ballooned to 9.7 percent of GDP. Now the government is under pressure from the IMF to meet the terms of its loan and slash the budget deficit in half by the end of next year.

Rajapakse is presenting a completely false picture of an economy on the verge of becoming the next “Wonder of Asia.” He delayed the budget to put off implementing the IMF's harsh measures. As soon as the election is over, however, he will bring down a budget that will impact heavily on the working class.

Currently, more than half of government expenditure comprises two items—debt servicing, which consumes 35 percent, and defence, which accounts for 21 percent. The government cannot cut the first item and will not cut the second. This means that the full brunt of the cutbacks will fall on price subsidies, education, health, welfare and public sector jobs and wages, resulting in a dramatic lowering of overall living standards.

The opposition parties provide no alternative. The United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) promote the populist fiction that “government corruption” alone is responsible for the present economic hardships. They cover up the real situation because they agree with the government that it has no choice but to make the working class pay for the worsening economic crisis.

Attacks on democratic rights

Implementing the Greek solution in Sri Lanka will provoke a confrontation with the working class and Rajapakse has prepared accordingly. In the course of the war, the government, assisted by the trade unions, ruthlessly suppressed the struggles of workers in the name of “national security”. Now Rajapakse is waging “an economic war” to “build the nation” using the same repressive measures. As anger among workers boiled over last year in the plantations, the ports, hospitals and other sectors, he deployed troops against strikers and used his emergency powers to ban industrial action.

To wage civil war, successive Colombo governments erected a vast police state apparatus. Rajapakse has gone even further, using his extensive executive powers to reduce parliament to a rubber stamp and increasingly operating through a politico-military cabal that has flouted the constitution and ignored the courts. Under his regime, pro-government death squads have murdered or “disappeared” hundreds of people with impunity. After the LTTE's defeat, the army illegally imprisoned 280,000 Tamil civilians in “welfare villages”. Similar methods will be used against

working people as they seek to defend their living standards and democratic rights.

The present election campaign is taking place amid a climate of intimidation and violence directed against opposition politicians, media critics and union activists. Following the presidential election in January, the government arrested opposition candidate Sarath Fonseka and dozens of his supporters on vague, unsubstantiated charges that the former general was plotting a coup. Now, Rajapakse is campaigning in the parliamentary election for a two-thirds majority that would enable him to change the constitution and entrench his autocratic rule.

The UNP and JVP posture as defenders of democratic rights. But they do not demand the immediate release of the thousands of Tamil youth held as “LTTE suspects” or the shutting down of the army’s “welfare villages” and detention camps. Like the government, the opposition parties are mired in anti-Tamil chauvinism. They backed Rajapakse’s criminal war, along with the military’s war crimes and gross abuses of democratic rights.

The bitter disputes between the government and opposition parties are over purely tactical issues, particularly foreign policy. South Asia is increasingly caught up in rivalry between the major powers. The US is waging neo-colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a proxy war in Pakistan to secure its dominance in the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. China is seeking to counter the US in every sphere, including protecting its vital trade routes across the Indian Ocean.

Rajapakse’s turn to Beijing for diplomatic, financial and military assistance has provoked growing alarm in Washington. A US Senate report last year declared that the US could not afford to “lose Sri Lanka”, which holds a key strategic position in the Indian Ocean. While Rajapakse leans towards China, the UNP favours the country’s traditional allies—the US and Europe. As the global economic crisis deepens, the danger is that Sri Lanka—like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq—will be swept up in wider rivalries, conflicts and wars.

End the political paralysis

Like their class brothers and sisters in South Asia and internationally, workers in Sri Lanka face great perils. The ruling class has a class war agenda, but the working class is politically paralysed. Workers remain tied to political parties and organisations that defend the bankrupt profit system and that are imposing the attacks on living standards and democratic rights. The openly bourgeois parties—Sinhala and Tamil—are assisted by the trade unions and the ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), which seek to dupe the working class.

It is time to draw sharp political lessons. Over the past three decades, the perfidy of the trade unions—whether tied to political parties or supposedly independent—has only deepened. In every struggle over the past four years, every union has functioned to impose the dictates of the Rajapakse government and big business. While the pro-government unions have done this directly, the “opposition” unions have served as safety valves to contain and dissipate workers’ anger. Central to their perspective is the defence of Sri Lankan capitalism and the maintenance of the

“international competitiveness” of Sri Lankan corporations.

It is critical that Tamil workers and youth understand that the LTTE’s defeat was not primarily a product of its military tactics, but of its political bankruptcy. Successive Colombo governments, which all whipped up anti-Tamil hatred to divide the working class, were responsible for the 26-year war. But the LTTE’s program of a separate Tamil capitalist state represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the Tamil masses. The LTTE was organically incapable of making any class appeal to the one social force that could defend the democratic rights of Tamils—the working class in Sri Lanka, South Asia and throughout the world.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which functioned as the LTTE’s mouthpiece during the war, has fractured into at least four different parts—all seeking to reintegrate themselves into the Colombo political establishment. While some TNA parliamentarians have joined the Rajapakse government, the TNA itself backed Fonseka—the general who waged Rajapakse’s war—in the presidential election. None of them has broken from the Tamil separatist politics that paved the way for the LTTE’s defeat.

The most dangerous role is being played by the NSSP and USP, which occasionally posture as socialists but function as the left flank of the major bourgeois parties. Their present orientation is to the UNP, promoting this right-wing, bourgeois party as a defender of democratic rights. Both outfits joined the UNP-led “Platform of Freedom” last year in mouthing empty platitudes about defending democracy. The NSSP has also formed an alliance with a TNA breakaway headed by M.K. Sivajilingam, whose right-wing orientation is demonstrated by his support for the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) in India.

To end the present political paralysis means making a fundamental break with all the parties of the ruling class and their left appendages. The common source of the drive towards war and the attacks on the democratic rights and living standards of working people in Sri Lanka and around the globe, is the profit system and its outmoded division of the world into capitalist nation states. The only alternative is socialism: the rational reorganisation of the vast resources of the global economy to meet the pressing needs of working people, rather than the profits of the financial and corporate oligarchy.

This is the perspective on which the SEP is campaigning to mobilise the working class to lead the rural masses to power and establish a workers’ and farmers’ government. The SEP fights for the formation of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) for a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and across the globe.

The SEP advances the following program to defend the living standards and democratic rights of working people.

* End the military occupation of the North and East

The SEP demands the immediate withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East and the freeing of all detainees and political prisoners. Only by opposing all forms of communalism and nationalism can Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers be unified 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 repeal all repressive and 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.

* 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, teaching methods and technology in private schools. The SEP advocates the upgrading and extension 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 and tuberculosis—while new diseases like H1N1 and bird flu spread. Increasingly, those with the financial means use private doctors and clinics, while the masses rely on a grossly under-funded 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 for women who toil as housemaids or menial workers abroad.

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.

To obtain the necessary resources for these policies, 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. We advocate the repudiation of all debts to the international banks for which workers are not responsible but are nevertheless required to pay. Without breaking the grip of the international banks, it is impossible to take the first steps to reorganise economic life in the interests of working people.

Workers and youth must begin to take matters into their own hands. During last year's pay campaign, plantation workers at the Balmoral Estate formed their own action committee, with the SEP's political assistance and independently of the trade unions. Their action represented 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 calls for the establishment of independent action committees in workplaces, working class neighbourhoods, towns and villages to defend their rights. Such organisations will form the basis of a mass political movement through which the working class can take power at the head of the urban and rural poor.

Above all what is required is the building of a political party that will educate, mobilise and lead the working class in its struggles. That party is the SEP, 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 privileges as an emerging conservative ruling caste. The final vindication of the Trotskyist movement's analysis of and 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 BLPI merged with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), whose subsequent entry 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. The RCL/SEP was the only party that consistently opposed the civil war and demanded the 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.

The building of the SEP as the new mass party of the Sri Lankan working class is the urgent task of the day. 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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