

Sri Lankan SEP holds meeting on Libyan war

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) held a public meeting at the Public Library Auditorium in Colombo on April 19 to discuss the imperialist war on Libya. The meeting attracted more than 80 workers and young people, including university and high school students.

SEP and ISSE teams had campaigned for the meeting at higher education institutions and in working class areas in Colombo, distributing articles, including “Imperialist hands off Libya!”, from the *World Socialist Web Site*. Discussion during the campaign showed a growing discussion among workers and youth in international developments and particularly the Libyan war.

A Ports Authority worker explained: “There is an interest among port workers over what is happening in the Middle East. Some workers even discuss these things, but informally, as there are no formal discussions organised by the existing working class leaderships.

“I think America, Britain and France are trying to disguise their real aims in launching this attack on Libya. Actually oil plays a central role and America’s claim that it has engaged in these attacks to rescue the Libyan people from Gaddafi’s suppression is wrong.”

An older railway worker said: “As you point out, in the past there was a tradition among workers of discussing world political events. But during the past several decades, it has turned bad and there has been a lack of discussion on international issues. However, that situation is changing. Many are talking about the

events taking place in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

“It is true that one of the reasons behind rising oil prices is the unrest in the Middle East. Here we experience acute hardship as [Sri Lankan] President Mahinda Rajapakse does not increase wages but slashes other subsidies. It is said that Middle Eastern people have undergone this kind of experience over a long time.”

In her opening remarks at the public meeting, SEP Political Committee member Vilani Peiris, who chaired the meeting, emphasised the necessity of a scientific appraisal of the NATO intervention against Libya. “Libya was a colony of the major powers in the past. The present imperialist intervention has re-colonisation as its aim in order to organise the entire region of North Africa and the Middle East in the interests of the imperialist powers.”

Peiris added: “Our opposition to this bloody intervention does not signify any support for the Gaddafi regime. Gaddafi, who came to power in 1969, has deprived the Libyan people of their democratic rights. After more than 40 years in power, about 30 percent of the population have been condemned to poverty, and unemployment is hovering around 35 percent.

“These conditions have created mass disaffection with Gaddafi’s rule. However, the Transitional National Council has called for the intervention of the major powers, which are seeking to replace one anti-democratic regime with another more aligned to their interests. The SEP campaigns for an independent mobilisation of the Libyan working people and oppressed masses in solidarity with the international working class.”

ISSE convenor Kapila Fernando explained the reactionary character of the perspective advanced by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which hailed the youth involved in the Middle Eastern uprisings, but was uncritical of the leaderships of these movements.

“It is true that youth in the Middle East are courageously taking part in struggles against the governments there and imperialism,” Fernando said. “However, the JVP is bogusly praising youth in the Middle East to attract young people here to the JVP, which is in a crisis.” He explained that the JVP’s student movement had appealed to the UN, which had sanctioned the war on Libya, to oppose state repression against students in Sri Lanka. “Youth must turn to the working class in Sri Lanka, in Libya and internationally to fight for socialism to oppose imperialist aggression and end capitalist rule,” he said.

The main speaker, SEP Political Committee member K. Ratnayake, said the claims by the US and its European allies that the bombing of Libya was a “humanitarian operation” were hypocritical. Over the past decade, the imperialist powers, including the US, France, Britain and Italy, had established close relations with the Gaddafi regime. The real agenda behind the NATO intervention was to install a client regime and assert control over the country’s oil.

Ratnayake explained: “In the context of the social upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East, Washington is also seeking to establish a foothold in strategically important Libya. Its aim is to intervene in these struggles and decide the political course of these countries in favour of the US so as to advance its strategic interests against rival powers.” The global financial crisis had intensified the rivalry between the major powers—rivalry that ultimately led to major wars.

The speaker continued: “At the outset of the upheaval in Libya, Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse had a telephone conversation with Gaddafi and urged him to restore peace—meaning to crush the rebellion. Rajapakse was a close ally of the autocratic Gaddafi. When the NATO powers started bombing Libya, Colombo issued a statement saying the attacks violated

the sovereignty of that country. Since then, the government has been silent. The Rajapakse government postures as anti-imperialist, but at the same time it is seeking an accommodation with those powers, including the US.”

Ratnayake added: “In Sri Lanka and internationally, the ex-left organisations have come forward to support the intervention in Libya and to block the working class from taking an independent standpoint in opposition to this imperialist war.” In Sri Lanka, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) had shamelessly backed the intervention. At a picket outside the Libyan Embassy in Colombo, NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne had handed over a petition calling on the Libyan ambassador to resign and join the rebels allied with the NATO powers.

Ratnayake emphasised that in opposing NATO aggression against Libya, the working class in South Asia, including in Sri Lanka, must forge an international unity against imperialist war on the basis of the fight for the program of world socialist revolution. In Sri Lanka, he said, this was bound up with the political struggle against the Rajapakse government and the capitalist system and for socialism.

WSWS reporters spoke to several of those who attended the meeting. A young bank worker explained: “Before coming to this meeting, I was a bit confused because I thought that we have to support Gaddafi in Libya and Rajapakse in Sri Lanka in our struggle against world imperialism. But if we supported Rajapakse, it would strengthen his hand in attacking us. I now understand that the struggle against imperialism is essentially bound up in the backward countries with the struggle against the national bourgeoisie and its governments.”



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