

SEP/ISSE May Day meeting in Colombo

Our correspondents
9 May 2011

On May 1, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka held a powerful May Day meeting at New Town Hall, Colombo, attended by workers, youth and professionals, including SEP members and supporters. They came from Colombo and other parts of the island, including the plantations in the central hill districts and the northern Jaffna peninsula.

The SEP held its meeting in opposition to the nationalist frenzy whipped up by the ruling coalition of President Mahinda Rajapakse, which organised a rally against the recently released UN report that details the government's crimes in the final months of the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). After boasting that it would mobilise a million people, the government's turnout was less than 50,000, even though state resources were used to transport participants.

SEP Political Committee member K. Ratnayake, who chaired the New Town Hall meeting, welcomed participants and extended the SEP's greetings to its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International. He said May Day was being held as revolutionary struggles of the working class against imperialism and its lackey regimes were beginning to unfold amid a deepening crisis of the world capitalism. He referred to the mass uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East since the beginning of the year as well as the struggle by workers in Wisconsin in the United States.

"Once again the objective conditions for building the international unity of working class are opening up the fight for world socialist revolution. The essential strategic experience to be drawn by workers from the struggles of the last century is that they can only achieve victory by building a revolutionary leadership," he said.

Ratnayake called on workers to reject the government's patriotic propaganda. The 30 years of civil war and continuing attacks on living standards and democratic rights demonstrated that the ruling class was incapable of addressing the basic needs of the masses. No support should be given to the war criminals in the government. He explained that workers had to unite across ethnic lines and provide leadership to the urban and rural poor in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government as part of the struggle for international socialism.

SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris explained that the

objective conditions that had propelled workers and the poor in North Africa, Middle East and the US into struggle were present in other countries as well. "The Chinese bureaucracy feared that the recent truck drivers' strike in Shanghai would encourage a huge movement of the working class in that country," she said.

Referring to a recent Asian Development Bank (ADB) report, Peiris said: "Inflation, especially rising prices for basic food items, has gone up to levels people cannot afford. The report says that from June 2010 to February 2011 world food prices have increased up by 40.7 percent, affecting millions. These developments have impacted throughout South Asia, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka." The report referred to the fear in ruling circles of potential social conflicts in these countries.

By attacking the UN report on Sri Lankan war crimes, Peiris explained, the government was trying to posture as anti-imperialist. However, President Rajapakse had received the support of the major powers in his communal war against the LTTE. Since the war ended in May 2009, he had been seeking investment from the imperialist countries, including the US and the European Union. To attract investors, the government had begun evicting the urban poor from central Colombo. Only by fighting for socialist policies could these attacks be halted and the rights of workers and the poor addressed, she emphasised.

ISSE convenor Kapila Fernando pointed out that the Rajapakse government was attacking public education. "It plans to allow foreign private universities to set up amid drastic cuts to existing universities that have led to a lack of facilities for students. In an attempt to suppress any opposition and brainwash students, the government is going to introduce 'military discipline,' imposing compulsory training for new university entrants at the end of this month."

Fernando said young workers and students faced the brunt of the world economic crisis. They confronted unemployment, retrenchments and education cuts in every country. In Sri Lanka, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its student organisation, the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), had sought to block any struggle by young people for socialism. A recent IUSF booklet entitled, *Approach to a national education policy*, explicitly stated that public education could be defended within the existing capitalist system.

"The problems faced by students and youth are a part of the

problems faced by the working class. They cannot be solved within the capitalist system in this country or other countries,” Fernando explained.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias, who delivered the main report, said the present world situation confronted the party and the working class, nationally and internationally, with new political responsibilities. He condemned the attempt by the ruling coalition, including the treacherous old parties of the working class—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Stalinist Communist Party (CP)—to whip up communalism and nationalism on May Day.

Dias explained that the road to the eruption of communal politics and civil war had been paved by the betrayal of the LSSP, which had joined the capitalist government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. The LSSP, which had once fought for the unity and political independence of the working class, had completely abandoned those principles and by January 1966 was participating in racist anti-Tamil demonstrations.

The LSSP, along with the CP, joined a second coalition government in 1970 and was instrumental in enacting a communal constitution that enshrined Buddhism as the state religion. The refusal of these so-called left parties to support the general strike movement of 1976 had allowed the United National Party led by J.R. Jayewardene to come to power and to incite communal violence around the country. The treachery of the LSSP and CP during the July 1980 strike against the UNP’s open market policies allowed Jayewardene to summarily sack over 100,000 workers and set course for the civil war that began in 1983.

“During the 1980s, the putrefaction of the old left parties was exploited by trade union syndicalists, who promoted ‘no politics in the unions’,” Dias explained. “Whenever union members from our party tried to intervene and explain that it was impossible to defend the rights of workers without a political struggle against the war, they were vehemently opposed and shouted down by the union bureaucrats. These union alliances have never called a substantial struggle since the defeat of the 1980 strike. They had no answer to the challenge thrown down by Rajapakse to choose between ‘either the civil war or wage demands’. As a result, the living standards of workers and the poor as a whole have now deteriorated to intolerable levels.”

Referring to the mass struggles in Europe and America against austerity measures, and the eruption of revolutionary upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa, Dias explained that these represented an objective international revolutionary process. The crucial issue raised by these events was the necessity of a conscious political leadership of the working class to lead the revolutionary masses.

Dias said that the last line of defence for the bourgeoisie in all these struggles consisted of the various ex-lefts and pseudo-socialists, who tied workers to one or other faction of the ruling class.

“While their counterparts in Europe and America have openly lined up with the imperialist aggression against the Libyan masses, NSSP [New Sama Samaja Party] leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne has taken a slightly different position, although along the same pro-imperialist line. He calls on the imperialist powers to impose ‘a total embargo on arms sales to the dictatorship and to freeze the assets of Libyan regime abroad to help the people against Gaddafi’ but stops short of supporting a military intervention. Yet it is common knowledge that sanctions, if not heeded, will be followed by military measures,” Dias commented.

“Karunaratne’s stance is the direct opposite of the internationalist line necessary for the working class. The working people must oppose the forces of reaction, including Gaddafi, through their own independent class methods. Ex-radicals like Karunaratne tie the working class behind the other reactionaries—the major imperialist powers. His role is the consummate expression of all those who oppose the fight for the political independence of the working class.”

Dias explained that the political orientation of the working class must always flow from its historical position as an international class. He called on workers to completely differentiate themselves from the patriotic hysteria stirred up by Rajapakse to oppose the UN report on war crimes in Sri Lanka. At the same time, the US and other major powers had backed the report, not out of any concern for the democratic rights of the people, but only as part of their global agenda to counter the growing influence of China in Sri Lanka.

The allies of the Sri Lankan working class, Dias explained, were its international class brothers and sisters, who stood opposed to the ruling elites in their respective countries. The international unity of the working class could be forged only on the basis of socialism.

“The only party that fight for this program, on a world scale, is the International Committee of the Fourth International. The SEP’s perspective for the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the socialist states of South Asia is derived from that internationalist program,” Dias concluded.



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