

Sri Lankan SEP meeting discusses rising class struggles

Our reporters
3 September 2011

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) held a meeting entitled “A socialist perspective for the rising wave of class struggle” at the Public Library Auditorium in Colombo on August 22. About 100 workers, youth, students and housewives attended.

During recent weeks, workers from the state-owned Electricity Board, Telecom and non-academic university staff have engaged in island-wide industrial action, demanding higher wages and improved working conditions. These struggles followed a three-month protest by university teachers. All these actions were betrayed by the unions.



SEP and ISSE members distributed thousands of leaflets for the meeting, particularly among these layers of workers. The campaigners also spoke to university students and shanty dwellers in Colombo who are threatened with mass evictions by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. Several residents from some of the Colombo shanties attended.

SEP Political Committee member **Vilani Peiris**, who chaired the meeting, pointed out that the struggles emerging in Sri Lanka were taking place in the context of revolutionary movements in North Africa and the Middle East. “All these struggles throughout the world are propelled by the systemic crisis of world capitalism,” she said.

Peiris drew attention to the significance of recent protests by workers from the Katunayake Free Trade Zone against the government’s new pension scheme. Their struggle erupted outside the control of the trade unions and forced the government to temporarily withdraw its legislation. “Without

an understanding of the depth of the crisis facing the capitalist system as a whole, the workers cannot spontaneously respond to the problems they confront and resolve them on a progressive basis,” she explained.

Peiris highlighted the growing international debt crisis, including in South Asia. In Pakistan, the public debt was equivalent to 56.8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and in India the figure was 71.8 percent. Sri Lanka’s foreign debt alone accounted for 36 percent of GDP. She explained that governments internationally, with the collaboration of the unions, were responding by imposing the burden on the working class through slashing jobs, wages and conditions.

SEP Political Committee member **W.A. Sunil** spoke of the recent experiences of electricity, Telecom and university workers. “Their struggles for better wages and working conditions objectively posed a direct challenge to the government,” he said.

“In the Ceylon Electricity Board, for example, the accepted norm had been that workers receive a 22 percent wage increase every 3 years. This should have happened in January 2009, but the government did not make the payment, saying it was in the midst of an intensified war [against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]. When wages were adjusted in October that year, the government refused to pay the arrears. When the demand for the arrears was raised, the government insisted that the workers must forego the money as a sacrifice for the war. As they supported the war, the unions caved in.”

Sunil continued: “The struggle of Telecom workers started on July 28, mainly for an increase in food and transportation allowances. This struggle also exposed the real character of the unions and their leaderships ... At the start, the union leaders swore that they would not abandon the struggle without gaining the demands in full. However, they sold out the struggle on August 5, not only without any significant achievements, but tendering an apology to the management for resorting to protest actions.”

ISSE convener **Kapila Fernando** pointed to the of youth in the struggles unfolding around the globe. “The students and youth are among the chief victims of the conditions created by the world crisis of capitalism. The critical question posed for them is to turn to the working class, which is the main revolutionary class and the only social force that can offer solutions to their burning problems,” he said.

Fernando exposed the politics of the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), which is affiliated to the Sinhala communal Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). “Under the conditions in which youth and students face a social order that offers no future, the IUSF sows the illusion that they can gain their demands within the capitalist system,” he said. “This is a calculated attempt to cover up for the real enemy: the profit system.” Fernando explained that by turning to the working class, youth can play a leading role in the fight for socialism.

Wije Dias, SEP general secretary and a member of the WSWS International Editorial Board, was the main speaker. Referring to recent elections, Dias commented: “During the past two years we have had a presidential election, a parliamentary general election, several rounds of provincial council elections and the latest local council elections. If one goes by the number of elections, Sri Lanka looks like a super-democracy.”

Dias explained, however, that the Rajapakse government was using the elections as camouflage for its police-state preparations, which were at a very advanced stage. “The SEP does not refuse to intervene in elections,” he said, “but for us it is a tactical step to propagate our revolutionary program among working people and the youth. What is more fundamental is the class struggle and the education, mobilisation and organisation of the working class on a socialist strategy to replace capitalist rule. That is why we are discussing a socialist perspective for the working class struggles at this meeting.”

Dias outlined the growing international wave of class struggle. In Tunisia and Egypt the masses had overthrown dictatorships. The workers in Wisconsin in the US and in Greece and Portugal had taken part in significant strike struggles. In Sri Lanka, workers from Bratex in the Colombo Free Trade Zone (FTZ) had come out on strike in February 2011, followed by agitations by plantation workers in March. Then had come the militant struggle of 40,000 FTZ workers who wanted to get rid of the government’s pension scheme. This had been followed by the struggle of the university teachers and then by the electricity, Telecom and non-academic university employees.

“None of these struggles achieved their aims, however. What they all faced was a common crisis of perspective and

leadership. They all confirmed, once again, the vital historic need to build mass parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International to lead the struggles of working people on the basis of the Trotskyist program of international socialism,” Dias said.

Dias pointed to the lack of any opposition within the Colombo political establishment to the government’s ruthless attacks on the working class. “None of the parties of the right or the so-called left has an alternative program to offer,” he said. “The United National Party (UNP) was responsible for starting the civil war to divide the working class as it introduced its pro-market economic agenda. The JVP became the main agitator for the communal war against the Tamil minority. President Rajapakse now implements the same IMF [International Monetary Fund] program that the UNP wanted to carry out. If the UNP were in power today, it would execute the same measures.

“The ex-lefts and pseudo-radicals are no better. They don’t oppose the government. This is what Nirmal Ranjith Devasiri, the ex-radical and the present leader of the Federation of University Teachers Association (FUTA), told the *Lakbima* paper: ‘What I say is that attacking this government from outside is useless. Because even though you attack it, it does not feel the attack. Also I am personally opposed to attacking this government.’

“What political conclusion must working people and the youth draw from these experiences? Are they to tolerate and entrust their future to these rotten and bankrupt leaders? The answer must be a firm ‘no’. Only the SEP proposes an alternative perspective for the working class and the oppressed people: to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally,” Dias said in conclusion.



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