

Sri Lankan SEP to contest provincial council election

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is contesting the Kegalla District of Sabaragamuwa Province in provincial council elections to be held on September 8. To meet the onerous requirements of the electoral law, the SEP submitted a full slate of 21 nominees, headed by Political Committee member A.R. Daulagala, which has been accepted by the election commissioner.

Kegalla, one of two districts in the south-western Sabaragamuwa Province, has a mixed Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim population of about 650,000. There are significant numbers of public sector employees, as well as plantation workers and small farmers. According to official statistics, 18.4 percent of the families live below the poverty line.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, using his extensive executive powers, arbitrarily dissolved the provincial councils in Eastern, North Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces and called fresh elections a year early. No official explanation has been given. Rajapakse's ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) already controlled the three councils.

One of the president's brothers, Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse, hinted at the reason when he told the *Daily Mirror*: "We need to know the pulse of the people from time to time." The government intends to win these elections by hook or by crook, and use the victories to claim public acceptance for its International Monetary Fund-dictated program of austerity—the slashing of price subsidies and essential services, including welfare, health and education.

In reality, there is growing resistance by working

people to the government and its policies. Hardly a day passes without a street protest in some part of the country by workers, farmers, fishermen, unemployed youth or students in defence of their living standards and basic rights. Huge price increases for essentials, including fuel and food, make it increasingly difficult to live.

Three years after the end of the island's civil war, Rajapakse's promises of peace and prosperity have proven to be a lie. The government is implementing the same kind of savage program being demanded by international finance capital in Europe and internationally. Having piled up huge debts to pay for his communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Rajapakse is now imposing the burden of the deepening economic crisis onto the backs of working people.

The government cannot implement its austerity agenda democratically. Increasingly, the police-state apparatus built up during decades of civil war is being turned on workers as they seek to defend their wages, jobs and living standards. In February, police fired on fishermen protesting fuel price rises, killing one demonstrator. In May last year, police similarly attacked striking free trade zone workers.

As in previous elections, Rajapakse and his presidential cabal will undoubtedly use state resources to promote its candidates, buy votes and intimidate opponents. Election monitoring organisations CAFFE and PAFFREL have provided evidence that such practices have already started.

The main opposition parties offer no progressive

alternative. The United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) supported Rajapakse's communal war against the LTTE, and defended its war crimes and suppression of the democratic rights of Tamils. While they claim to speak for working people, both parties in office have implemented the pro-market agenda demanded by the corporate elite.

The UNP and JVP denounce the government for holding staggered provincial elections and criticise its anti-democratic methods, but only to divert attention from their lack of any fundamental differences with government policies. During its time in office between 1978 and 1994, the UNP started the civil war, initiated pro-market restructuring and was notorious for its abuse of democratic rights.

The UNP and JVP can only posture as democrats and defenders of working people because of the support of the middle class, pseudo-radical organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP). The NSSP and USP have joined in the protest campaigns of the UNP in an attempt to give progressive credentials to this right-wing bourgeois party.

The so-called Joint Opposition—the UNP, NSSP, USP, Democratic People's Front and the Tamil National Alliance, formerly the LTTE's parliamentary mouthpiece—have called on Rajapakse to give priority to the Northern provincial council election. The government rejected the demand, which was based on the false premise that such a poll would pressure Rajapakse to relax the oppressive military occupation of the North.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party campaigning for a socialist alternative in these elections. There is no solution to the pressing social needs of working people within the borders of Sri Lanka, let alone the Kegalla District. The worsening crisis of global capitalism is the deepest since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and is producing new wars, mass unemployment and poverty, and intensifying attacks on democratic rights. The working class can defend its basic rights only by unifying internationally

in a joint offensive to abolish the profit system and establish a world planned socialist economy.

The unity of the working class can be established only by opposing all forms of nationalism and communalism. That is the significance of the SEP's long record of opposing the Colombo government's war against Tamils and defending their basic democratic rights. The SEP fights to unify and mobilise workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—and rally the urban and rural poor in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government.

The Socialist Equality Party candidates will intervene in the struggles of working people on the basis of socialist policies to reorganise society from top to bottom to meet the social needs of the vast majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. The fight for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam is completely bound up with the struggle for a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally.

The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and advances the perspective of socialist internationalism alongside its sister parties of the world Trotskyist movement. The SEP calls on workers, farmers, youth and students to actively support our election campaign, vote for our candidates and, above all, apply to join the revolutionary party.



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