

Sri Lanka: US SEP presidential candidate speaks in Kegalla

Our correspondents
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Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) presidential candidate in the US, addressed a second successful public meeting organised by its sister party, the SEP in Sri Lanka, on Wednesday. Held at the Hotel Heshani Reception Hall in Kegalla, it was attended by workers, young people and professionals.

SEP Political Committee member Ananda Daulagala, who heads the party's slate of candidates for Kegalla district in the upcoming Sabaragamuwa provincial council elections, chaired the meeting. He explained that White's visit flowed from the party's perspective of fighting for the socialist unity of the working class in the US and internationally. "This is the strategy of the SEP and our world party, the International Committee of the Fourth International," he said.

White began his speech by pointing to the importance of the Trotskyist movement's "rich history of the struggle for socialist internationalism" in Sri Lanka, and the critical political lessons of that struggle.

In his report, he noted that with the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, American imperialism had been given a new "multi-cultural" face and was now waging wars in Libya and Syria in the name of "human rights." But its aim was the same: the assertion of its military and economic domination of every region of the world, a drive that brought with it the danger of a new world war.

"With all the arrogance of colonial viceroys," White said, "Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are declaring that the Indian and Pacific oceans are basically American lakes." The US, he said, "was drawing Sri Lanka, India and many Asian countries into its drive to militarily encircle and ultimately wage a devastating war against China."

White explained that American imperialism was powerful but the ruling class was not invincible. He pointed to the decades-long decline of US industrial and economic dominance, the rise of financial parasitism and the enormous growth of social inequality. This, he said, was preparing the ground for an eruption of the class struggle in the US.

These conditions, he added, were discrediting capitalism and creating a fundamental shift in consciousness. He noted a series of struggles, including by Michigan car workers, which expressed the growing rebellion of workers against the nationalist and pro-business trade unions that were fully backing Obama's strategy of wage-cutting in order to entice companies to "in-source" production from China and Mexico.

Referring to his visit to a local rubber plantation to meet workers, White said he was struck by the oppressive living conditions of workers and the enormous anger, particularly among youth, over the fact that their society was moving backward despite crucial advancements in the technology.

"Conditions may appear very different from the US. But the sentiments expressed by workers and youth here are the same as the sentiments of workers and young people in the US," White said, adding that their old political parties did not speak for them. He noted that one plantation worker, pointing to the union dues deducted from his meagre pay cheque, said the union was worthless. This, White said, was a universal sentiment.

White said the SEP campaign in the US was exposing the various pseudo-left groups that were seeking, once again, to tie workers to Obama and the Democratic Party on the basis of racial and identity politics. These groups were supporting imperialism in the name of "human rights" and upholding the authority of the reactionary unions. They did not speak for the working class but an upper middle-class layer that had gone over to imperialism.

The only alternative to war, austerity and poverty, he concluded, was the unified struggle of the working class on the basis of an international socialist program. "That is what our party fights for in the US, Sri Lanka and all over the world."

His speech provoked an important and lively discussion in the question-and-answer session. One audience member claimed that the working classes in US and Sri Lanka were different and that Sri Lankan workers were satisfied with "minimum requirements." Referring to "cultural differences," he argued that workers' conditions in the two countries could not be compared. He asked how their workers could be unified.

White pointed out that the US and Sri Lanka were both part of the world capitalist system. “There is increasingly a levelling of the conditions of masses of people, with the decline of living standards of working people in the advanced capitalist countries.” There was no fundamental difference between a Sri Lankan and an American worker who needed to feed his family, educate children and have a decent home.

White criticised the argument that Sri Lankan workers should live with “minimum conditions” as “reactionary.” He said: “The crushing poverty in Sri Lanka, South Africa or Latin America, is not a cultural question. It is a product of oppression by multinational corporations and the irrational organisation of economic life. As long as people in Asia live under poverty, the living standards of workers in Europe and America are not safe either.”

White asked why in the twenty-first century, as mankind developed computerisation and robotics, it was not possible to raise the cultural and material conditions of life of every human being on the planet.

In response to a question about the domination of religion and the so-called failure of materialism, White declared: “Materialism has not failed. The materialist method of our party is based on a scientific understanding of the development of history, society and thinking.”

He continued: “The persistence of religious conceptions and superstition is bound up with the fact that man still does not control his conditions of life... Insofar as masses of people are confronted by a social system over which they have no control, and they continue to face unemployment, poverty and war, religious conceptions of a better life after death persist. It is only when the working class can make this life better and fundamentally change conditions that religion will completely disappear.”

Several questions related to political developments in Sri Lanka, including the country’s protracted civil war. White invited SEP General Secretary Wije Dias to answer them. Dias explained that the SEP in all countries, including Sri Lanka and the US, fought on the basis of the same international socialist strategy and perspectives. He reviewed some of the lessons of the principled and fearless struggle by the SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), against the anti-Tamil communal war.

One questioner asked about the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), a break-away group from the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Dias said the JVP’s petty-bourgeois nationalist politics had led rural youth to disaster. The JVP had enthusiastically supported the communal war and the FSP continued to defend its reactionary policies despite a so-called “self-criticism.” He said recent FSP meetings under the banner “What is to be done?” had been a fraud, as the FSP “lacked any

coherent policy” and did not seriously discuss its own history.

Dias explained: “You have to analyse this issue [what is it be done?] deeply and join a party, which seriously studies the history of its own struggle and its principles.” He presented the recently published Sinhala version of *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka* and invited audience members to study it.

The WSWs spoke to several workers and youths who attended the meeting.

A youth from the Ambanpitiya rubber estate said: “We are very much encouraged by the speech of Jerry White. We are surprised by the situation in America. For example, he reported that 58,000 people control 50 percent of the wealth in America, while 20 million people are living in extreme poverty. This is the first time we have heard about that. The JVP is also talking about socialism but it is the opposite of socialism. It supported the government’s war against the Tamil people. We understand that the international unity of workers is necessary.”

Seneviratna, a postal worker, commented: “I agree with the principles of social equality and internationalism. White’s visit made a great impact on our minds. Before listening to him I was wondering why these organisations who claim to be socialist cannot be united. Now I understand that if such an organisation is socialist, it should be based on internationalism.”

Kumara, an unemployed graduate, said: “When the students, trade unions and left parties got together to back the university lecturers’ strike, I thought that it was a great success. As White pointed out, however, they are all fighting for an alternative within the capitalist system. White made clear that without replacing capitalism with socialism we cannot defend the right to free education. Yet, these organisations are working against such a program. I would like to discuss these issues further.”

Kulatunge, a retired teacher, said: “I am satisfied with White’s answer to the question I asked about materialism. I understand that without a fight for the development of socialist consciousness of people, we cannot establish the authority of materialism against religious backwardness.”



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