

Sri Lankan graphite miners speak to SEP campaigners

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A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team visited the Bogala graphite mines last weekend as part of the party's election campaign for the Kegalla district in the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council. SEP campaigners spoke to mine workers and retirees in nearby Aruggammana village.

The SEP is contesting the election with a slate of 21 candidates led by Political Committee member Ananda Daulagala. The government called elections for three provincial elections for September 8, a year early. President Mahinda Rajapakse is exploiting the state apparatus to seek to record a clear victory, as a means of stifling growing opposition from working people to his government's austerity measures.

The Bogala graphite mine, 130 kilometres from the capital Colombo, is more than 200 years old. Originally privately owned, the mine was nationalised in 1971 by the coalition government of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party.

In 1991, the mine was again privatised by the United National Party (UNP) and is currently owned by a German company. In 1970s, it had a workforce of about 1,000, but now only 168 remain. Over 5,000 tonnes of graphite are produced annually, mainly for export.

Most people showed no enthusiasm for the election. "We are not interested in this election," one young man told campaigners. "We have been under this provincial council for decades. Both the major parties, [the SLFP and UNP] ruled them. Not even basic requirements, such as a dispensary, transport and water, have been provided, despite their promises."

The young man, born in the late 1970s, had hoped for a secure job in the mines. However, after the mine's re-privatisation, working conditions worsened. Many miners died of respiratory diseases. His father, an ex-miner, also suffered such an ailment. The young man was forced to join the army to become the family's bread-winner.

His sister explained: "Some of the old workers died. Others became helpless. Boys were forced to join the army and girls had to work at the garment factories for low wages."

The area was previously an LSSP stronghold. The SEP campaigners took the opportunity to discuss the history of the LSSP, which had emerged as an anti-colonial party advocating socialism in Sri Lanka.

Those who formed the LSSP broke from its nationalist program during World War II and formed the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), which fought under the banner of the Trotskyist Fourth International. The BLPI was liquidated into the LSSP in 1950, however, leading to a decade of political backsliding that finally resulted in a historic betrayal when, in 1964, the LSSP joined a bourgeois coalition government.

Ariyasena, 70, a retired miner, said: "My father worked in the mine. I can recall how those workers suffered. My father was a strong Samasamajist [LSSP member]. I can remember the speeches of [LSSP leaders] N. M. Perera and Colvin R. de Silva. They spoke against capitalism and for social equality. I was also attracted to those ideas. Though these leaders abandoned us, those revolutionary days still echo in our mind."

Ariyasena explained that when mine workers were on strike during the 1953 Hartal—a general strike and shut

down of businesses—police pumped chilli powder through the mine’s ventilation system. The LSSP leaders stopped the strike. When workers came out of the mine, the police arrested and severely beat them. Ariyasena’s father died later as a result of a heart problems caused by the beating.

“My father’s generation worked like slaves, dressed only with an ambude (a loin cloth),” Ariyasena said. “We only gained our rights through struggle.” After 1971, miners were allowed to wear shorts and were given a proper meal. Before that they were given only a bun and tea during their eight-hour shifts.

“N. M. [Perera] and Colvin [de Silva] told us it was only a one-mile walk to socialism from nationalisation and tried to appease us,” the retired miner commented. “But the mine was again privatised in 1990s.”

Ariyasena recalled the confusion created when the LSSP leaders joined the coalition with the SLFP. The LSSP characterised the SLFP as a “left party.” Party members were asked to work with SLFP branches. He later became the SLFP branch leader in the village. The LSSP branches were liquidated. Finally, N.M. Perera himself lost this electorate in the 1977 elections, after holding it for 42 years.

Most of the older generation in the village had mixed feelings about the LSSP. They were enthusiastic about the revolutionary traditions of the BLPI, but hated the leaders who betrayed them.

Piyadasa, 52, who is still working in the mine, recalled: “In the late 1930s, when malaria was widespread, they [the LSSP] converted the nearby school into a hospital and treated the patients. To pay for the treatments, they raised funds by selling *sooriya mal* (sun flowers).”

When asked about the island’s protracted civil war that ended in 2009, older villagers expressed their disagreement with the conflict. A retired miner, 75, explained that the LSSP had in the past opposed Sinhala and Tamil communalism. The party had campaigned against the SLFP’s policy of Sinhala as the only state language, but later abandoned its opposition. “Actually, we didn’t support the war. But, unfortunately many youth in our village joined the army and died,” he said.

The SEP team campaigned at the mine’s main entrance.

Most workers said they had no faith in the government or the main opposition parties. They expressed anger over the escalating cost of living and poor living conditions, and said they had decided not to vote for anyone.

After SEP campaigners explained the difference between the SEP’s revolutionary socialist program and the capitalist policies of other parties, attitudes began to change.

Thushara, 40, said: “We are looking for such a movement. My parents talk about LSSP struggles in the past, but my experience is bitter. They [the LSSP] betrayed us. With these experiences, how can I believe you are a genuine party?”

That question led to a discussion of the protracted political struggle waged by the SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, against the LSSP and its betrayal. Thushara agreed to meet up with the SEP again.

Sisira, a young worker, explained the hardships that miners face. His monthly wage was just 20,000 rupees (\$US153). With skyrocketing prices, including for food, fuel and transport, a worker needs 40,000 rupees to provide for a family.

Sisira was bitter about the role of the trade unions at the mine. Most workers are members of the union controlled by the chauvinist Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). “This JVP union has done nothing for us,” he said. “When the management said they were making losses, the union accepted that, and abandoned the struggle for a pay hike. But, according to reports, the company increased its profit by 159 percent in 2010.

“Your [SEP] program gives us a breath of fresh air. I’ll vote for you to express my agreement with you.”



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