

Jerry White concludes visit to Sri Lanka with meeting in Galle

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (US) presidential candidate Jerry White concluded his tour of Sri Lanka on Thursday with a meeting in the southern port city of Galle. About 100 workers and youth attended the meeting and engaged in extensive discussion following the opening report.

Sri Lankan SEP and International Students for Social Equality members carried out a vigorous campaign to build the meeting in Galle and Matara, speaking to workers at post offices, ports, hospitals, railways and some private companies.

Ratnasiri Malalagama, a member of the SEP political committee in Sri Lanka, chaired the meeting. “White has dedicated his entire adult life, more than three decades, to the struggle for international socialism.” He added, “The SEP presidential election campaign is not limited to America, but is part of the struggle to unify the international working class.”

White delivered a detailed report on the current world economic and political crisis and explained the international socialist perspective of the SEP.

“When I joined the Workers League, the predecessor of US SEP, in 1979 as a young worker in New York City, I first came to know about rich history of long political struggle by the Trotskyist movement in Sri Lanka,” he said. “The Workers League was founded in 1966 on the lessons of the great betrayal of the LSSP [in joining the bourgeois government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike] in 1964 and the struggle of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against this betrayal and political opportunism.”

White explained that, in contrast to the variety of

pseudo-left and Maoist organizations, the SEP insists on the revolutionary role of the American working class. “The last three decades have seen a fundamental transformation in the conditions of the American working class, which is leading them on to the road of revolutionary struggle.”

White pointed to the role of groups like International Socialist Organization (ISO) in the US, which seek to subordinate workers and youth to Obama and his Democratic Party. He added: “In our election campaign, we call on the working class to break from the Democratic Party and join the struggle to build an independent socialist party of the working class. Our fight is for the international unity of the working class.”

Following White’s speech several people from the audience raised questions.

A retired university lecturer, noting that Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government is seeking to balance between the US and China, asked about the fate of the country in this situation. White said: “It is unclear which direction the Rajapakse government is moving in the conflict between the US and China.” Referring to arrival of the Chinese defense minister to Sri Lanka the day before, White said that Washington will follow such developments with great concern.

“Whatever the attempts by Rajapakse to balance between the major powers, Sri Lanka will be caught up in the growing international conflicts. The economic crisis is leading to the danger of world war.”

Another participant noted the attacks on education carried out by successive governments in Sri Lanka, which are pushing the working class into ignorance. He asked how the SEP is working to educate workers and youth in a Marxist program. White pointed out that the

crisis of the capitalist system has created conditions for the development of socialist consciousness, referring to the revolutionary upsurge of the working class in Tunisia, Egypt and Greece last year. “The central issue the working class confronted in those struggles was the lack of a revolutionary leadership and perspective.”

A young workers asked about the influence and program of the socialist movement in the US and the SEP’s characterization of the revolutionary upsurge in Egypt last year. “The issue of socialism in the US is complex,” White replied. “There is certainly a growing interest.” He cited an opinion poll after 2008 financial crash, which found that 40 percent of young people preferred socialism over capitalism.

White spoke about the struggle of the Trotskyist movement in the US for decades for the political independence of the working class, against efforts by the union bureaucracy and the Stalinists to politically tie the working class to the big business Democratic Party.

Discussing the protests in Egypt last year, White noted that, despite violent repression, masses came to the streets, eventually forcing the downfall of long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian working class played a central role, as seen by the mass strikes of textile workers and Suez Canal workers, which ultimately forced Mubarak out.

However, none of the social and economic aspirations of the working class have been realized. The military regime still holds power, now with the support of the Muslim Brotherhood. These developments, White noted, have “exposed all those, such as the Revolutionary Socialists, who claimed that the Egyptian military and the right-wing Muslim Brotherhood would fulfill the aspirations of the working class.”

“A second revolution is necessary in Egypt. It must be a revolution led by the working class to take political power and appeal to the international working class against any threat of intervention by imperialist forces.”

The WSWS spoke with several participants.

A worker from the state-owned Sri Lanka Transport Board said, “We received only half of our pay during last six months, and we knew that the board has not paid contributions to our provident [pension] fund for two years. All of our unions are incapable of fighting.

“As you say, the workers should unite and fight against these hardships. In that sense, Jerry White’s explanation is admirable. However, as we cannot unite them [workers] nationally, how can we unite the workers internationally?”

SEP members explained how the trade unions and the pseudo-socialist parties such as the LSSP betrayed the traditions of the international working class and collaborated with the capitalist rulers to shatter the unity of the working class.

Sandun Jayasinghe, a machine operator in a washing plant, said, “It is difficult to survive, as prices of essentials are continuously increased without any pay hikes. The bosses are asking more work from us without any overtime pay. Actually there is no lack of struggles of the workers against these conditions, but they have failed to win any demands. I wondered why they can’t realize their demands through these struggles.

“After listening to White’s lecture, I saw that the aspirations of the masses can be realized only through the struggle for socialism. As White pointed out, breaking from the trade unions and capitalist parties is necessary. And the other point I learned is the necessity for international collaboration of the working class. I’ll talk about these issues with my fellow workers.”



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