

# Australian SEP candidate speaks to Sri Lankan Free Trade Zone workers

W.A. Sunil  
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James Cogan, a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate in the Australian federal elections, spoke to Katunayaka Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers in Sri Lanka last Sunday. Cogan, the assistant national secretary of the Australian SEP, was in Sri Lanka as a part of an international tour by SEP candidates. Cogan addressed two public meetings, in Colombo and Galle, last Thursday and Saturday.

Katunayaka is the one of 14 FTZs in Sri Lanka. The FTZ workers—more than 350,000 in number—constitute the country's single biggest industrial workforce and one of the most oppressed sections of the working class. Over 40,000 work in the Katunayaka FTZ, situated near the Bandaranayake International Airport, about 30 kilometres from Colombo. More than 90 percent are from rural areas, mostly young women. They toil under extremely difficult working conditions, on low wages—exploited by international and local companies as a cheap labour source.

FTZ workers warmly welcomed Cogan when he visited some of their boarding houses. More than 60 workers were living in about 30 rooms. They each have to pay 2,000 rupees per month for a 3-metre by 3-metre room, plus about 1,000 rupees per month for electricity. They have no piped water for washing and drinking, and instead must draw water from a common well.

Cogan expressed great pleasure in meeting them. He said: “The workers in Australia and Sri Lanka are experiencing common conditions. Workers are exploited by the transnational corporations in the same way in every country.”

Cogan said his visit, on invitation from the Sri Lankan SEP, was part of the fight to unify and mobilise the working class against the growing danger of a US-led war on China. He explained that world capitalism, including in the US, was in a deepening crisis.

Garment factories in Australia were being shifted to countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Vietnam, as the transnational companies sought cheaper labour and higher profits, Cogan said. “Without ending the profit-oriented capitalist system and establishing a socialist planned world economy, the working class cannot defend its rights in any country.”

Cogan added: “For this task, workers need a world party, and only the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* fight for that end. My visit to Sri Lanka is part of this struggle.”

A group of workers, employed in different factories, explained their working and living conditions.

A female worker from Nest Garment said: “I studied up to the advanced level, but I had to take this job because of my family's economic difficulties. My parents live by farming and that income is not enough. Now I have been working for 10 months. My basic monthly salary is 14,000 rupees [\$US106], and with other allowances and overtime work, I earn about 23,000 rupees per month.”

The Nest Garment worker explained that she must meet management targets, and produce 110 tags per hour. She said FTZ workers had only 14 days' annual leave. “Our attendance allowance is 1,700 rupees. If we are absent two days per month, even because we are ill, we lose the allowance. We have to work 11 hours per day, from 7 am to 6 pm. We have 15-minute tea breaks in the morning and evening, and a half an hour break for lunch.”

There was only one visiting doctor for the 4,000 workers in her factory, the worker added. “He visits only two days per week and only sees workers who are not well and who have been referred by a company nurse. There is no system for examining other workers

for possible illnesses.”

Another female worker from the same factory said she had been employed there for more than 10 years. “My monthly earnings are about 25,000 rupees, with allowances,” she explained. “With the rising cost of living, this is not enough to manage our expenses. As we have no other jobs, we are compelled to do this.”

Cogan commented that the situation in Australia was little different. The global corporations were levelling the wages and other conditions of workers in every country. “Hundreds of workers are losing jobs in Australia and unemployment is rising.”

A female worker who has been employed at the GT glove factory for six years gave a further picture of the low wages and oppressive conditions. “My basic wage is 14,000 rupees and I get some 23,000 per month altogether,” she said. “We have to work under a shift system, with three shifts per day. If you work on the night shift, you have to work three night shifts per week.”

Cogan urged workers to read the WSWS as a means of developing their political understanding of the issues facing the international working class.



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