

SEP campaign team discusses socialist program in Jaffna

Our correspondents
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Campaign teams from the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka recently visited Karainagar Island and Jaffna suburb villages, speaking to residents of Kondavil East, Chundukuli and Kachcheriadi.

The SEP is running a slate of 19 candidates in the Jaffna district as part of the Northern provincial council elections being held on September 21.

The team distributed several thousand copies of SEP election manifesto and discussed the party's international socialist perspective with workers, youth, farmers and fishermen in the area.

Karainagar Island and the suburb villages were among the most affected by the brutal 26-year-long war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in country's north and east provinces. Ordinary Tamil people bore the brunt of the war and remnants of buildings demolished by the air strikes and shell attacks of Sri Lankan security forces can still be seen.

Explaining his terrible experience during the war, a farmer from the Kondavil village said, "Thousands of people lost their lives. Those who survived lost everything they had earned for years or generations. In this village alone some 60 houses were destroyed by air strikes. You can't even imagine how to rebuild your former life. Some things you can't get back forever. I lost one of my legs by a shell attack."

Another farmer from the same village explained the economic difficulties they faced. His income is not enough to manage family expenses. The cost of farming equipment prices has gone up many times over. "It takes a lot of money to cultivate even a small plot of land. We can't even get our production costs back and pay our loans," he explained. He added that he had no faith in any political party, including Tamil National Alliance [the TNA, the main Tamil bourgeois party], and had decided not to vote.

A carpentry worker explained his experience in LTTE controlled areas where there was no more democracy than under the Sri Lankan government. He added, "My education was disrupted by the LTTE. They forced us to work at their sentry points. If we refused, they would assault us. Because of that I could not complete GCE (General Certificate of Education) ordinary level. People faced severe difficulties coming out of areas controlled by the LTTE without permission and some were shot".

Because of this repression, he said, many people were opposed to the LTTE policy but could not speak out openly. This was one reason for their defeat, he said, adding, "I agree with your stand that the defeat of the LTTE was not mainly a question of military weakness but their separatist politics".

Many people expressed frustration and disgust with the established political parties. A youth at Chundukuli in Jaffna said, "Politicians come just before one week for the election and then they disappear". Campaigners explained the SEP was different because it was fighting to mobilize workers and the oppressed themselves and arm them with a new perspective and revolutionary party. He agreed to read the SEP election manifesto.

Regan, a young pot maker, said although his wife owns land with a house in another area they had to live in a rented house paying 4,500 rupees per month. His wife's house is within a "high security zone" demarcated by the military.

He was interested in discussing the United States' "pivot to Asia." Opposing US war threat against China and provocations against Syria, he commented, "The US acts for its own interests. It wants to use the ports and other facilities here in Sri Lanka also".

A casual worker said he agrees with the SEP socialist policies but asked whether the people could wait until

socialism comes. The SEP members explained the growing economic crisis of world capitalism posed a historic challenge to workers. There was no alternative to building an international socialist movement of the working class and fighting for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

“You are correct,” the worker said, “but it is not possible immediately”. Instead he said the TNA would bring some concessions for Tamil people.

The SEP members explained that the TNA is a party of Tamil capitalist class, which defends, not the interests of workers and the oppressed masses but those of Tamil elite. The SEP, they said, was fighting for the working class to take power in its own hands and fight for an international socialist strategy.

During a visit to the University of Jaffna, students explained their conditions to SEP campaign team. “There is not enough space in lecture rooms and library facilities or enough computers in media unit,” one said. Another added, “The chairs and desks are broken. University has only four hostels with 150 rooms. They are not maintained properly and there are not enough water facilities.”

Even though the war has ended, they said, the state security forces still have the university under surveillance. “We have no right to carry out political activities at the university. The military intelligence and police intelligence gather information on student activists. We have no right to stage any protest. These days the security forces have been withdrawn from the university area and Jaffna city because the government wants to pretend the provincial elections are being held in a democratic and peaceful environment.”

One management faculty student from Jaffna University said, “Whoever campaigns in this election, the TNA will win. Four years after the war our problems are same. Once the LTTE was powerful military force. Later many became opposed to them because of their repression against the people. Their attack on ordinary Sinhala people also strengthened the government. It is a good idea to unite Sinhala and Tamil people to defeat this government,” he said, referring to the SEP program.

Among residents of the Jaffna area there is overwhelming opposition to the Rajapakse government. There remains, however, confusion among some sections of teachers, students and workers about the

TNA. Almost all of the media in Jaffna is campaigning for this bourgeois party, claiming it would bring some change and would challenge the government.

In fact, the TNA is seeking a power-sharing deal with the Colombo government. It appeals to US imperialism and India for backing to pressure the Rajapakse government into reaching such an arrangement. Both countries want the Rajapakse government to distance itself from Beijing. India is also concerned about political instability in Tamil Nadu where there is deep opposition to the repression of ethnically related Tamils in Sri Lanka.

A final year art student challenged the government’s claims about developing the country. “They are constructing roads and buildings after the war. But that development is not for our benefit. We are still living as we did during the war. We can’t talk freely. They have placed CID (the Criminal Investigation Department or Sri Lanka’s secret police) in the campus. If we talk about our educational problems or political issues, we will be questioned and threatened.”



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