Sri Lankan SEP election campaign receives wide hearing

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign in Sri Lanka's provincial council elections is receiving important support from workers, youth, housewives and the poor. The party is running a slate of 43 candidates, headed by Political Committee member Vilani Peiris, for the Colombo district in the Western Provincial ballot. Elections for the Western and Southern provincial councils are on March 29.

SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members campaigned at Wanathamulla, Slave Island and Wellawatte in Colombo city and the suburb of Ratmalana over recent days. SEP supporters distributed hundreds of copies of the party's election manifesto and other WSWS material in Sinhala and Tamil languages.

Wanathamulla and Slave Island are focal points in the election because thousands of residents are being evicted as part of the Rajapakse government's attempts to transform Colombo into a major South Asian commercial hub. More than 70,000 shanty dwellings are to be demolished.

About 5,000 Wanathamulla residents are facing imminent eviction. These include government and private sector workers, small business people and casual day labourers.

Wanathamulla residents verbally clashed with Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the Sri Lankan defence and urban development secretary and brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse, during a recent visit. Gotabhaya Rajapakse came to Wanathamulla to personally warn residents opposing the evictions.

Soon after his visit, suspected state intelligence personnel abducted Samaradheera Sunil, a local resident who had argued with him. Thousands of people poured into the streets demanding Sunil's release and forcing the abductors to release the local man. Residents also chased away Duminda Silva, a ruling party parliamentarian, who visited the area in an attempt to pacify people.

SEP campaigners visited the area two days after these incidents, speaking with residents and condemning the abduction and the government's attempts to seize the area and sell it to investors.

A woman commented on the government's claims that it would transform Sri Lanka into another Singapore. "What's the use of this if they evict us from our lands?" she asked. "We are in a day-to-day struggle to survive." She denounced the anti-democratic evictions and explained that many residents had worked overseas for years to save some money and build a decent home.

Another woman told SEP campaigners she was not going to vote for any party in the forthcoming ballot. "During the elections they sold us false promises and we were trapped into voting for them. We now know about these corrupt policies and will confront these sorts of candidates. We are not afraid of them. The very same people who are trying to bulldoze our homes, come and ask for our votes," she said.

The woman said five families were living in her home but they would all be forced into a 350-square foot building, which was smaller than her current house. The woman said her daughter was in grade three and the family now faced higher education expenses and skyrocketing prices of all essentials items.

Party campaigners explained that the SEP was different from other parties and was contesting the elections in order to explain the grave economic crisis and war threats facing workers internationally. "No problems can be solved within capitalist system. A workers' and peasants' government must be brought to power and socialist policies must be implemented," an SEP team member said.

A man of about 50 said: "Most of the political parties say one thing and do another thing. JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna] members came to us and said they

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were opposed to our eviction. Now they are appealing to the government to give us suitable houses. That means they accept that we should be evicted and sent to another place."

The courts, police and other institutions were in the government's hands, he added. The politicians claimed everyone was safe because the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was over, he said, but "our suffering has not ended."

A Chemical Industries Colombo worker explained that he had just returned home from pawning some jewellery in order to pay electricity and other bills. He had built his home on land inherited from his parents, using money that he had earned working overseas for years. "Gotabhaya Rajapakse told us that he can evict us by force if he wants to. He uses military language but we are going to fight," he said.

SEP team members explained the growing danger of war in Asia and globally—life-and-death issues that are not discussed by any of the other parties contesting the election or in the Sri Lankan media. Residents listened attentively.

The SEP organised an impromptu street meeting, which was addressed by SEP candidates Vilani Peiris, Panini Wijesiriwardena and W.A. Sunil. They explained the SEP's socialist and internationalist alternative to the developing threat of a world war and the Rajapakse government's austerity drive. Speakers also urged residents to establish action committees, independent of all the major parties and their pseudo-left supporters, to defeat the government's eviction plans.

Residents asked why action committees were needed. SEP candidates explained that action committees were necessary in order to mobilise workers independently of the establishment parties, and for the unification of residents with other workers facing attacks on jobs and living standards. Only under a workers' and peasants' government that implements socialist policies could this issue be addressed, they said. Billions of rupees were needed to provide decent houses for all.

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