

Sri Lanka: SEP election campaign explains danger of war

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members last week campaigned among workers, youth and students in Awissawella, 59 km east of the capital Colombo. A slate of 43 SEP candidates is contesting the Colombo District in the March 29 Western Provincial Council election.

The campaign teams distributed thousands of leaflets in the Sinhala and Tamil languages, including the SEP's election manifesto and other WSWs articles.

Students were particularly struck by the SEP's warnings of the dangers of war, produced by the aggressive moves by the US government against both China and Russia.

"What you say about the [world] developments toward a third world war makes sense," a young student told a campaign team in a discussion with a group of students attending a tuition class.

Students wanted to know why and how a threat of war is "important" for people in Sri Lanka. "I have not seen it in the news that way," a student said.

That was hardly surprising because the Sri Lankan media and other political parties are silent on the confrontations that the Obama administration in Washington is provoking with Russia over the US-backed coup in Ukraine, and with China over territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas.

The campaign team explained that Sri Lanka was already being dragged into the global geo-political tensions, especially US imperialism's drive in Asia to isolate and encircle China diplomatically and militarily. The US was hypocritically using the war crimes committed by the Sri Lankan government in the final stages of the war against the Tamil separatist LTTE to pressure Colombo to abandon its growing relations with Beijing.

One student commented: "I didn't look at it [US pressure on Sri Lanka over human rights violations] that way until you explained this to us." Another student said he understood that if Sri Lanka moved came closer to the US, it was "also getting closer to war tensions."

In Awissawella, the campaign team also discussed the water pollution in nearby Hanwella. Villagers suspect it was caused by a Dipped Product rubber gloves factory. Hundreds of people in the area held several protests against the pollution last month.

Local people knew that the Venigros factory in Weliweriya, owned by the same company, faced similar protests over water pollution. Last August, the government deployed the military, which fired on demonstrators at Weliweriya, killing three youth.

Villagers said they suspected that the pollution of the drinking water had already caused health problems. A young mother whose husband is a driver in the Dipped Product factory commented: "We all oppose the factory for pollution. But if the factory is to close down then we are going to be affected. No one talks about it. Some try to set villagers against factory workers. We need clean water and we need a job also. I don't know how we protect both."

Team members explained neither the environment nor jobs could be defended outside a struggle to overturn the capitalist system itself, which subordinated every aspect of life to corporate profit.

The campaign team also visited the Elston Rubber Plantation in Puwakpitiya, Awissawella. Plantation workers are among the most exploited sections of the working class in Sri Lanka.

A worker who is a member of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which functions as a trade union, described its role in supporting management to impose

onerous working conditions. The CWC is a partner in President Rajapakse's ruling coalition, and the union's leader, Arumugam Thondaman, is a cabinet minister.

"Many of us are contract workers," the plantation worker explained. "If we cannot meet the target of a day's collection of 7 kilograms [of latex] we're paid only half a day's wage. And we would not get the 450 rupees a day wage that the unions and management publicised when signing their collective agreement. Also, if we don't work 25 days a month, we don't get the attendance allowance."

In the dry season, it becomes impossible to meet the rubber milk tapping targets. Other workers invited the team into the plantation's line rooms, where they live, to show the dangerously damaged and congested conditions.

Awissawella is mainly a rubber producing area, with plantations run by large companies as well as small holders. It is one of the poorest areas in the Colombo District. Rubber plantations were established during the final decades of the nineteenth century under British colonial rule. Most of the workers are Tamil-speaking, descendants of those brought from Tamil Nadu in southern India to toil in the plantations.

The area was once a political stronghold of the Trotskyist movement. Several leaders of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), including Philip Gunawardena and N. M. Perera, first started their political activities among workers in this area during the late 1930s. In 1951, however, the BLPI was dissolved into the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). After a protracted degeneration, the LSSP joined the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party in a coalition government in 1964, betraying the working masses and the fight for a socialist perspective.

The SEP held a public meeting in Awissawella town hall last Sunday. The speakers explained the danger of war and its relation to the Rajapakse government's attacks on the democratic rights and social position of working people.

SEP election candidate Cecil Gamage said that the SEP's campaign was not a vote "grabbing" exercise, like it was for other parties, but sought to "prepare the masses for the coming struggles by explaining the socialist program."

IYSSE committee member Sanjaya Jayasekera pointed to the US-led provocations in Ukraine, and

warned that capitalism offered only war and poverty to young people. He also outlined the reactionary and politically bankrupt character of the Russian regime now headed by Vladimir Putin that came to power after the dissolution of Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy. He explained the necessity for a politically independent struggle by the Ukrainian, Russian and world working class, saying "the only way to stop a descent into nuclear war is for the international working class to take power under the program of the world socialist revolution."

Jayasekera also condemned the cuts in universities. About 800 female students at Kelaniya University recently lost their hostel facilities. He warned that the government's only answer to the protests of the university students was increased repression. Troops and police were being trained for this purpose.

W. A. Sunil from the SEP political committee spoke in detail on world developments and the government's attacks on working people. He explained why SEP made the mounting threat of militarism and war a central theme of its election campaign. The deepening economic crisis of world capitalism was the objective source behind the war tensions. "Without toppling imperialism and capitalism, we cannot overcome the danger of a new world war," he said.

Sunil explained the necessity for a conscious antiwar movement of the international working class. Only the SEP advanced this perspective, he said. "To fight against the austerity and police-state measures of the Rajapakse government, the working class needs an independent political movement based on an international socialist perspective," he concluded.



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