

SEP statement for Sri Lanka's presidential election

Vote for SEP candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena! Fight for a socialist program against war and social counterrevolution!

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
15 December 2014

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), calls on workers, youth, intellectuals and housewives to support and participate in our campaign for the presidential election on January 8.

Our candidate, Pani Wijesiriwardena, is the only one fighting for a socialist program against the growing threat of world war and the relentless assault on the living conditions and democratic rights of working people. We oppose all the capitalist candidates and their pseudo-left backers, including the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP).

Wijesiriwardena, a member of the SEP Political Committee, has a long record of political struggle for the interests of the working class stretching over four decades. He is a retired teacher well-known for his determined defence of public education against attacks by successive governments and the treachery of the trade unions. Wijesiriwardena serves on the Colombo Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The entire Colombo media and political establishment is keeping workers and youth in the dark about the mounting danger of war. In opposition to every other party, the SEP places the struggle against imperialist war at the centre of its election campaign. We seek to break the conspiracy of silence and, in collaboration with our sister parties of the ICFI, build an international anti-war movement of the working class to put an end to capitalism.

The global financial crisis in 2008 signalled the onset of a worsening breakdown of capitalism that has greatly exacerbated geo-political tensions and rivalry. Once again, the imperialist powers, chief among them the United States, are striving for global control of resources, markets and strategic position through every means, including military ones. One hundred years after World War I and 75 years after World War II, the decaying capitalist order is threatening humanity with a calamity of even greater dimensions.

2014 has marked a dramatic acceleration of the drive to war. In February, the US, along with Germany, recklessly provoked a confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia by engineering a fascist-led coup in Ukraine. In August, Obama authorised an open-ended war in Iraq and Syria on the pretext of combating Islamic militants that has the potential to engulf the Middle East and drag in the major powers.

In Asia, the US is escalating its military build-up against nuclear-armed China—the central target of its “pivot to Asia.” Washington is expanding military alliances, strategic partnerships and basing arrangements

throughout the region. Any one of a series of flashpoints—the Korean Peninsula, maritime disputes in the South China and East China Seas, or India's border disputes with China—could be a potential trigger for war.

In a speech during the G20 summit last month, Obama emphatically reiterated his commitment to the “pivot,” declaring that the US had invested “blood and treasure” in the region in the last world war—and by implication would do so again.

Every country in the Asia Pacific is being drawn into the maelstrom of rivalries and war preparations. The US is strengthening its strategic partnership with India, along with its alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand, and seeks military agreements throughout the region. Sri Lanka is no exception.

Sri Lanka and the US war drive

These geo-political tensions are expressed directly in the political crisis surrounding the Sri Lankan presidential election.

Over the past five years, President Mahinda Rajapakse has engaged in a precarious balancing act between the US and China. While his government remains heavily dependent on Chinese aid and investment, Rajapakse has faced a cynical US-led “human rights” offensive. Having backed the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and turned a blind eye to the Sri Lankan military's atrocities, the US has cynically exploited the same war crimes to pressure Rajapakse to pull back from Beijing.

Facing growing opposition at home and abroad, Rajapakse called the election two years early, to pre-empt his opponents and secure another term in power. However, in what was obviously a long-planned operation, Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena immediately quit the government and announced he would stand as the common opposition candidate, supported by the United National Party (UNP).

Washington clearly gave the green light to this bid to split the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its coalition, and lay the basis for Rajapakse's defeat in the election. The linchpin of the plot was former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who used her influence inside the SLFP to engineer an alliance between Sirisena and the UNP. Kumaratunga is connected, via her involvement in the Clinton Foundation, to former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, one of the chief architects of Obama's “pivot.”

The banner of Sirisena and the opposition camp—“fight for democracy against the Rajapakse government”—is just as fraudulent as Washington posturing as a champion of “human rights” while it wages illegal wars of

aggression and carries out torture and drone assassinations.

Rajapakse heads an autocratic regime that is responsible for tens of thousands of civilian deaths during the war against the LTTE, and police-state measures against opposition to its austerity program. The SEP warns, however, that Sirisena, if elected, would be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in prosecuting the interests of the ruling class. All the opposition parties gathered around the “common candidate” have blood on their hands.

* Sirisena himself, as a senior minister, is fully responsible for all the Rajapakse government’s crimes and abuses. He has repudiated none of them.

* The UNP launched the island’s communal war with the bloody 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms, and in the late 1980s unleashed death squads that slaughtered 60,000 youth to stamp out rural unrest.

* Washington’s instrument, Kumaratunga, came to power as president in 1994 promising to end the war and instead intensified it. In 2004, she used her sweeping executive powers to sack the elected UNP government.

* The Democratic Party is led by former army commander General Sarath Fonseka, who was responsible for the final offensives against the LTTE in 2009 that killed tens of thousands of civilians.

* The Sinhala-Buddhist extremists of Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which defected from the Rajapakse alliance, were rabid promoters of the communal war and continue to champion anti-Tamil discrimination.

* The same is true of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is giving backhanded support to Sirisena by vocally calling for Rajapakse’s defeat and not standing its own candidate.

It is not “democracy” that is holding this reactionary line-up together but deep frustration in sections of the ruling class and upper middle classes that the government’s cronyism, as well as its failure to line up fully with Washington against Beijing, is damaging their business prospects and career opportunities.

While not openly backing Sirisena, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is giving him tacit support in the belief that its mercenary interests will be best served by a US-aligned government. The TNA perpetrates the lie that greater autonomy for the North and East will benefit Tamil workers and peasants. In reality, it will only help the Tamil elites line their pockets.

The most insidious political role is being played by various liberals, NGO officials, human rights activists, academics and particularly, the fake-left organisations. They are providing badly-needed “democratic” camouflage for Sirisena and his sordid alliance.

Chief among the cheerleaders is the pseudo-left NSSP, whose leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne now appears on campaign platforms for Sirisena, calling for a vote for this government defector as the means “to topple Rajapakse’s dictatorial rule.”

The USP and the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party are not so brazen. But their denunciations of Rajapakse and their silence on the anti-working class record of Sirisena and his allies speak volumes. It is shame-faced support for this right-wing, pro-US alliance.

The SEP unequivocally opposes Sirisena, along with all his allies, apologists and camp followers. We warn workers and youth that if he is elected, Sri Lanka will be drawn further into Washington’s war plans, with devastating consequences for working people.

At the same time, the SEP gives no support to Rajapakse and rejects his posturing as the “victim of an international conspiracy.” Rajapakse is no opponent of US imperialism. Indeed, in the course of his diplomatic manoeuvring, his government has ensured close working relations between the US and Sri Lanka militaries and signed a military servicing agreement with the Pentagon.

The agenda of social counter-revolution

The drive to war goes hand in hand with social counter-revolution against the working class. Regardless of whether Rajapakse or Sirisena wins the January 8 election, they will intensify the austerity agenda dictated by international finance capital, forcing working people to bear

the burden of the economic crisis. Both are pledged to continue the pro-market “open economic policy” that has already devastated the living standards of working people.

Rajapakse boasts that his government has raised annual per-capita income to \$US3,280, but in reality the social gulf between rich and poor has only widened. The wealthiest 20 percent of the population receives 53.5 percent of the country’s income, while the poorest 20 percent gets just 4.4 percent. The living standards of working people will only worsen as the next government imposes the International Monetary Fund’s demands to slash the budget deficit to 3.8 percent of gross domestic product by 2016. While price subsidies for basic commodities and essential services such as education and health will be cut, further tax concessions and economic incentives will be lavished on big business and the wealthy elite.

Rajapakse has already made clear how he will respond to working class opposition. After the LTTE’s defeat in 2009, he continued to expand and strengthen the military and the police-state apparatus. The police and military have carried out violent attacks on demonstrations and strikes, killing a young Katunayake Free Trade Zone worker in 2011, a protesting fisherman in Chilaw in 2012, and three youth during a protest in Weliveriya against industrial pollution in 2013. If Sirisena wins office, he will be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in suppressing the resistance of working people.

The Rajapakse government has deliberately fomented communalism as a means of dividing working people. It falsely claims that “LTTE terrorists are reviving” to incite fear and justify its massive military occupation of the North and East, while nurturing fascistic Sinhala-Buddhist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena and Ravana Balakaya to target Muslims. Sirisena’s embrace of the communal extremists of the JHU demonstrates that he will use similar methods.

The SEP opposes all forms of nationalism, chauvinism and racism, and fights to unite workers, regardless of ethnicity, language or religion, in a struggle for their common class interests.

The struggle against war and austerity

The struggle against imperialist war and austerity is necessarily international in scope. It is literally impossible to oppose the predatory actions of imperialism or the global conglomerates and financial houses on the basis of one nation, no matter how big or small.

Since formal independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has proven, again and again, its organic incapacity to oppose imperialism. Only the working class, under the leadership of the SEP, can fight imperialism and its war drive, by joining with its class brothers and sisters in South Asia and internationally to build an international anti-war movement.

Similarly only the working class can mount a genuine struggle for democratic rights. The SEP calls for a constituent assembly, elected democratically, to draft a new constitution that abolishes all repressive and discriminatory laws. The demand for a constituent assembly can only assure democratic rights insofar as it is part of the political struggle to mobilise the working class and oppressed masses to abolish capitalism.

The SEP advocates the following policies to address the social crisis facing workers and the poor:

* To assure jobs for unemployed youth, we propose the expansion of employment through the reduction of the working week to 30 hours, but without any loss of pay. A multi-billion rupee public works program must be launched to create well-paid jobs and meet urgent public needs for housing, schools, hospitals and roads.

* We demand the scrapping of the contract labour system, which has been used to undermine the pay and conditions of the working class as a whole. More than half the workforce now depends on contract and casual work. All workers must have the right to secure, well-paid jobs. Pay must be immediately raised to a living wage, indexed against inflation.

* The SEP calls for the spending of billions of rupees to expand public education and health care to make free, high quality services available to all. Public housing must be greatly expanded to provide decent accommodation at affordable rates.

* We advocate making state lands available for all landless farmers, regardless of ethnicity. The debts of all poor farmers and fishermen must be cancelled immediately and cheap credit, technical advice and other assistance made available. Prices for their products must be guaranteed to assure a decent standard of living.

The above policies are not compatible with the private ownership of the large corporations and banks, which must be nationalised under the democratic control of working people. Society as a whole has to be reorganised from top to bottom on socialist lines to meet the pressing needs of the majority, not the profits of the super-wealthy few.

The struggle for socialism is only possible through a consistent fight for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie. The working class must mobilise the rural masses in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. The SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally.

Build the SEP

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, was established in 1968, in a political struggle against the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's naked betrayal of the principles of international socialism when it joined the capitalist government of Sirima Bandaranaike. The RCL/SEP was the only party that consistently fought for the unity of the working class throughout the protracted civil war and on that basis demanded the withdrawal of troops from the North and East.

Our party is based on the political and theoretical legacy of Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the Russian Revolution of 1917. In 1938, Trotsky founded the Fourth International to resolve the crisis of the working class leadership, based on the program of socialist internationalism. The SEP is grounded on Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated that in countries of a belated capitalist development such as Sri Lanka, only the working class is capable of resolving the democratic tasks as part of its struggle for socialism.

We call on workers, rural poor, youth and intellectuals to support our political campaign. Join our campaigns, attend our meetings and donate financially for the election fund. Vote for our candidate. Above all, we urge you to carefully study our political perspective and program, and to apply to join the SEP and build it as a mass revolutionary party of working class.



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