

Sri Lanka: SEP election campaign reveals widespread disillusionment with main political parties

Our correspondents
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Teams of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters have launched an intense campaign for the SEP's presidential candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena in a number of areas across the country during the past two weeks. These include Colombo, Kandy, Chilaw, Gampaha and Hatton where public meetings have also been held. Campaigners have distributed thousands of copies of the SEP election manifesto and other party literature.

The election is scheduled for January 8. Apart from Wijesiriwardena, 18 other candidates are contesting, including President Mahinda Rajapakse and the opposition "common candidate", Maithripala Sirisena.

Derana TV, a popular Sinhala channel, provided an opportunity for Wijesiriwardena to participate in the Debating Platform on December 10. He was able to explain party policy for about 10 minutes. Using the right of candidates to air their policies, Wijesiriwardena spoke for the 30-minute time allocation about the SEP platform on national television in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation gave him 15 minutes too.

Campaign in Chilaw

People expressed their hostility to the Rajapakse government over the increase in prices for consumer items, especially fuel prices which badly affect the many fishermen in the Chilaw area by increasing the cost of operating their boats.

"This is not like the previous elections. Whoever becomes president will not bring anything good for ordinary people. The situation will worsen," said one retired state employee now running a small business to meet family needs.

"The state television talks of development programs. But we are unable to maintain our lives. We cannot get a child admitted to school. We cannot afford to get medicine for the sick. Unlike in the past, massive sums of money are spent by the MPs and ministers and even local government officials for election propaganda."

He added that apart from the SEP no other party was raising the danger of a third world war. "But when we watch foreign news on TV, such as the war situation in the Middle East and the Ukraine, we know something of what is happening. The media and political parties in this country pay no attention to this. It is the capitalists that want the war, not the poor masses."

A small boat operator in Aluthwatte near Chilaw explained the situation fishermen faced after the government increased fuel prices by 50 percent in 2012. He recalled how the police shot at them when they held protests against the price hike, killing one of his colleagues, Anthony Fernando. He contemptuously said: "Now that the election is closing in they have reduced fuel prices."

University students

Students at University of Colombo drew attention to the intensified US intervention in Sri Lanka political affairs.

Dhanushka, a second-year student from Badulla in the central hills district, explained that because his parents were farmers facing regular losses he had been compelled to cut monthly expenses down to 6,000 rupees (\$US45). He added: "Even after getting a degree we cannot find a decent job. I'm compelled to do extra exams like the test for chartered accountants to obtain better prospects."

Speaking about the election, Dhanushka said, "The

government is using the war victory [against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]. It is suppressing democracy in the country. People may vote for the common candidate of the opposition, but they stand to lose whoever comes to power. All the governments deceive the masses. I'm disgusted with politics."

Dhanushka said the drive to war was caused by the power hunger of the imperialist leaders. He was attracted by the SEP's explanation that war arose out of the contradictions of capitalism between private property and socialised production, and the world economy and nation states.

IYSSE supporters came across students who have been affected by the cuts to social programs that were imposed on the IMF's orders. However, they had been diverted into supporting the "common opposition" candidate Sirisena through the propaganda of the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and fake left organisations such as Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP).

Sirisena, a former Rajapakse government cabinet minister, defected from the ruling party at the instigation of opposition UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga with the tacit support of Washington. His candidacy is an attempt to establish a government that will toe the US line against China.

Ratmalana railway

A campaign team visited a housing area for railway workers adjacent to the Ratmalana Railway Work Shops on the outskirts of Colombo. Hundreds of railway workers live in these houses. Most of the properties are badly in need of repairs but are being neglected by the government.

Railway workers expressed their dissatisfaction about decreasing real wages. One worker commented that while prices frequently increase, his salary had been almost the same for the past several years. Many railway employees are working day and night to earn more.

Referring to Rajapakse and Sirisena, the two major candidates, he said, "We know that both of them are the same but wonder what we can do? What I think is that Rajapakse will grab power somehow and continue the oppression." He praised the SEP saying, "I congratulate your efforts in fielding a working-class

candidate."

A worker from Dialog (a private telecom company) who is living with his brother's family in railway housing commented: "Dialog has set up a separate manpower agency to recruit workers like us. Now there are several hundred workers recruited through this agency." He has worked for the company for eight years as a contract worker and can be retrenched at any time. After listening to SEP campaigners, he said: "I realise that neither Rajapakse nor Sirisena will make any real change to this oppressive system." He contributed to the SEP election fund and said he would read the SEP program and consider voting for its presidential candidate.

Prasadika, a railway worker's wife, said, "We need a change for sure. But there's no assurance that there will be a change whoever comes to power. I have two children and we need at least 40,000 rupees to send them to school and other expenses. Life is getting more difficult each day."

Commenting on the preparations for world war, she said, "I do agree that the internal situation in the country is decided by the external conditions in the world. My question is how to stop a world war if it is going to happen?" She listened attentively as SEP campaigners explained the necessity to build an anti-war movement of the international working class on a socialist basis.

One school student, the son of a railway worker, commented, "I see these devastating bombings by US forces on television and wonder what we can do to stop these attacks. After listening to you I realise that we should organise." He said he would read the web site and come to SEP meetings.



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