

Pseudo-left USP plays double game in Sri Lankan presidential election

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The United Socialist Party (USP), the Sri Lankan affiliate of the pseudo-left Committee for Workers International, is taking a thoroughly duplicitous stance in the country's presidential election on January 8.

The USP has nominated its own leader Siritunga Jayasuriya as an "independent" candidate, but in reality provides back-handed support for the common opposition candidate Maithripala Sirisena. It denounces President Mahinda Rajapakse and his "dictatorial regime" while offering muted criticisms of Sirisena who was until a month ago part of the same "brutal" government.

Rajapakse called the presidential election two years early amid growing opposition among working people at home and international criticism of its "human rights" record. The US has mounted a cynical campaign over the war crimes carried out by the Sri Lankan military during its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—a war that Washington backed to the hilt—to pressure Rajapakse to distance himself from China.

No sooner had Rajapakse announced the election than Sirisena resigned from the government and announced his candidacy with the backing of the opposition United National Party (UNP). All of the opposition parties have in one way or another joined in this campaign, which has been engineered with the green light from Washington. The US push for regime-change in Colombo is bound up with its broader "pivot to Asia" aimed at undermining China economically and strategically throughout the regime.

For years, the USP, along with the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), has been promoting the right-wing UNP, which is well-known for its pro-US orientation, as the "democratic" alternative to Rajapakse. When in office, the UNP has been just as ruthless as Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in waging the communal war and suppressing the opposition of working people.

In its perspective document last year, the USP justified its opportunist alliance with the UNP declaring: "In this environment of governmental repression, we have had to engage in united agitation, even at times with capitalist parties against the repressive measures of the Rajapakse regime. With even the capitalist UNP, imperialism's lackey, we have had to appear on the same stage and participate in street agitations against the dictatorial regime's repression and oppression."

Now that the UNP is backing Sirisena, the NSSP and USP have also fallen into line behind the common opposition candidate. There is a division of labour. While NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne is openly campaigning for Sirisena, the "independent" USP voices limited criticisms of the candidate while focussing its main fire against Rajapakse.

The USP has kept its distance from Sirisena under conditions where there is significant suspicion and hostility to his campaign among working people. As a senior minister in Rajapakse's government and SLFP general secretary, he bears responsibility for all of the crimes of the Rajapakse regime and attacks on the working class. The fact that the UNP and other opposition parties have immediately gathered around Sirisena indicates that they have no fundamental differences with the government.

The USP is seeking to corral this opposition behind Sirisena by suggesting that he represents the "lesser evil" as compared to Rajapakse. In an interview on the USP web site, its candidate Jayasuriya declared: "I am standing independently to provide an opportunity for the people to reject the current regime and add their voice to the demand for the creation of a better economic and political system that serves us all."

Asked why the USP was not standing with the opposition, Jayasuriya was quick to present his anti-government credentials and willingness to collaborate in

defeating Rajapakse. The USP, he declared, “continues to participate in protests and all sorts of action against the undemocratic and brutal regime in power. We are prepared to work with various parties and organisations, despite sharp differences, in order to get rid of the dictatorial regime.”

Indeed the USP’s preferred option was to form an electoral alliance with other fake left organisations that share its concerns about being too closely associated with Sirisena. It held discussions with the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), the Maoist Communist Party and a breakaway NSSP to stand an “alternative left candidate” on a common electoral platform. Only when that manoeuvre fell apart over tactical disagreements did the USP nominate Jayasuriya.

The USP’s criticisms of Sirisena are limited to his “commitment to neo-liberal economic policies” and concerns about what his presidency might bring. Jayasuriya is completely silent about Sirisena’s record in office and, above all, on the behind-the-scenes machinations involving Washington that brought about his candidacy.

The silence is not accidental. Like pseudo-left organisations around the world, the USP is lining up with US imperialism in its intrigues, interventions and military build-up throughout the region against China. In its newspaper *Rathu Tharuva* last November, the USP put China, as well as India, on a par with US imperialism, declaring: “Sri Lanka at present is fast becoming a victim of the imperialist needs of the countries such as America, China and India.”

The false characterisation of China and India as “imperialist powers” tears these countries out of their international and historical context. Their economic expansion over the past two decades has been as sources of cheap labour for major global corporations on which China and India remain dependent for investment and technology. Moreover the designation of China as imperialist serves a very definite political purpose. By equating China and the US, the pseudo-lefts line up directly or indirectly in support of the US propaganda justifying its war preparations against an “aggressive,” “provocative” and “rising” China.

Washington’s “human rights” campaign on Sri Lanka, which has been fully backed by the USP and the NSSP, is aimed at integrating the strategically-located island into its war preparations. The US efforts in the UN Human Rights Council to push for an inquiry into Sri Lankan war crimes have constituted a threat to Rajapakse to break his

ties with China or face the prospect of charges in the International Criminal Court. As in the case of Burma, if Colombo lines up with Washington, the Sri Lankan military’s atrocities would very quickly be buried.

Despite his demagoguery about being the victim of “an international conspiracy,” Rajapakse sought to balance between the US and China. While continuing to seek economic aid and investment from Beijing, he has sought to curry favour in Washington and blunt criticism of his government. Both Rajapakse and Sirisena are determined to impose the austerity demands of the IMF onto working people.

The USP postures as “independent” by declaring that “Rajapakse and the main opposition candidate contest this election as representatives of neo-liberal economy.” However, what it opposes to “neo-liberalism” is not socialism, but a return to the perspective of national economic regulation of the 1950s and 1960s that was completely undermined by the globalisation of production.

The USP’s program is thoroughly mired in nationalism. One of its election statements explains that “for a new country, we would, for a transitional period, change the economy as an economic system based on national needs.” The call to restructure the economy “based on national needs” is nothing other than appeal to sections of the middle classes and business hit by growing international competition. Workers in Sri Lanka cannot resolve the social crisis they confront or end the growing danger of war within the framework of the nation state but only as part of an international movement of the working class to abolish capitalism.

The struggle for socialist internationalism is the only basis for fighting for the genuine political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie. The SEP is the only party standing in the presidential election that rejects all forms of class collaboration and seeks to mobilise the working class and oppressed masses independently as part of an international struggle against war and social counter revolution. We urge you to vote for our Pani Wijesiriwardena and to join and build the SEP.



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