

SEP wages powerful campaign in Sri Lankan presidential election

Pani Wijesiriwardena
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) conducted an important political campaign in the Sri Lanka's presidential election, held on January 8. SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters distributed some 20,000 copies of the party's election manifesto in Sinhalese and Tamil, and discussed the party's program with a wide range of workers, youth and the rural poor.

At the centre of the campaign was the fight by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to build an internationally unified working-class movement against imperialist militarism and the universal assault by the ruling elite on the social and democratic rights of the masses. The SEP and IYSSE held 10 successful public meetings in different parts of the island, including in Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, as well as the northern peninsula, the central hill districts and the south.

The election was held in a highly-charged political atmosphere. Incumbent President Rajapakse announced the election two years early out of fears that waiting would disadvantage his plans to retain power. Opposition among workers and rural poor was mounting to his government's attacks on their living standards.

As soon as the election was called, Maithripala Sirisena, the health minister and general secretary of the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), defected from the government and declared he would challenge Rajapakse. Sirisena's desertion was engineered by former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, in partnership with pro-US United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, who immediately endorsed Sirisena as the "common opposition candidate."

Behind Sirisena's challenge stood the Obama administration, which, as part of its aggressive "pivot" to Asia and war preparations against China, wanted regime-change in Colombo in order to reverse the close economic and military relations that Rajapakse developed with Beijing. Sirisena's victory sets the stage for a further escalation of geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, as Washington draws Sri Lanka into its attempt to diplomatically and economically undermine China and encircle it militarily through a network of alliances and bases.

Sirisena and the UNP tried to conceal their pro-imperialist agenda by fraudulently claiming to represent "democracy" against Rajapakse's "dictatorial" rule. Rajapakse sought to cling to power through a Sinhala communalist campaign. He accused the opposition of being backed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whose 26-year separatist war for a Tamil state in northern Sri Lanka was crushed by government forces in 2009.

The SEP alone fought for the political independence of the working class from both the Sirisena and Rajapakse camps and all the pro-capitalist candidates. Its candidate for president, Pani Wijesiriwardena, won 4,227 votes across the island.

As a presidential candidate, Wijesiriwardena was able to explain the SEP's policies through national television and radio statements on the state-owned stations. The media as a whole, however, consciously suppressed any coverage of the party's campaign and the critical issues it raised.

Only four media representatives attended the SEP's Colombo press conference in early December to announce its candidacy, and none reported it. In Jaffna, 13 media organisations sent reporters to the party's press conference but also published nothing.

In stark contrast, saturation coverage was provided to the two main capitalist candidates. The media also gave considerable publicity to the fake-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the United Socialist Party (USP) and the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), all of which, in one way or another, promoted the lie that Sirisena was the “democratic” alternative to Rajapakse.

During the last week of December, the SEP candidate addressed well-attended public meetings at Kayts, Karainagar and Jaffna city, in the majority Tamil northern province. Party members also campaigned in Kilinochchi, the LTTE’s former administrative capital.

Tamil workers and youth expressed seething anger at the devastation they suffered due to war. Five years after it ended, they are still living in dire conditions. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the main Tamil bourgeois party, and the pseudo-left organisations, consciously sought to channel the hostility to the government behind Sirisena, claiming he would bring some relief.

The SEP campaign cut through all the lies. The party’s analysis attracted nearly 200 people to three meetings held in Jaffna. In a typical response, a student told the SEP after the meeting at Jaffna Weerasingham Hall: “I had no knowledge about the dangers of another world war. I came to know about it though your meeting. I don’t want to believe this, but I have to after hearing the speeches. We are already severely affected by the impact of the civil war. Many countries have nuclear weapons, so a world war would be a disaster.”

A politically significant event during the final stages of the campaign was a debate on education policy at Peradeniya University in Kandy on December 29, organised by the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), the FSP’s student wing. The FSP stood a candidate in the election, but called on people not to “split” the vote for Sirisena.

The debate involved Pani Wijesiriwardena for the SEP, Chameera Koswatta representing the FSP candidate and Srinath Perera from the USP, which also devoted its campaign to promoting the fraud that Sirisena was the “lesser evil.”

Wijesiriwardena explained that free, high-quality education was a basic social right that should be available to all. He characterised the attacks on such rights and imperialist militarism as two sides of the same coin, both driven by the intractable crisis of world

capitalism. To secure rights such as education and prevent war, the international working class needed to take political power into its own hands, reorganise society on the basis of socialist policies and allocate the necessary resources to meeting the social needs of the world’s population.

Opposing the SEP program, the USP representative Perera asserted that “for an interim period, we need to change the economy into a system that develops national interests, in order to go toward a socialist society.” In other words, USP is for maintaining capitalist relations within Sri Lanka. It advances a nationalist perspective in opposition to the struggle for socialism.

The SEP candidate explained how the nationalist orientation of the USP led it into an alliance with the right-wing and pro-US UNP. The USP, together with the NSSP, promoted the UNP and paved the way for it to return to power and deepen the class war against the working class and oppressed.

Koswatta, the FSP spokesman, attempted to divert students’ attention from the SEP’s analysis of the global breakdown of capitalism and the dangers arising from the US “pivot” against China. He claimed sarcastically that speaking about the threat of world war was “an interesting story” but nothing more, implying that the great international issues of the day were irrelevant to workers and youth in Sri Lanka.

The debate demonstrated the class role of the fake left parties. They seek to block the development of an independent and international political movement of the working class and prevent youth taking up the struggle for socialism. The support won by the SEP for its perspective in its election campaign, though still small, shows that the fight against the pseudo-left groups and all forms of nationalism is essential in building the ICFI and its sections as the revolutionary leadership of the international working class.



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