

SEP to stand in Sri Lankan general election

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka will contest the general election scheduled for August 17 with a slate of candidates in 3 of the 22 electoral districts—the capital Colombo, Jaffna in the north and Nuwara Eliya in the central tea plantation area.

The SEP is the only party that represents the interests of the working class and advances an internationalist and socialist program. We fight for the independent mobilisation of workers at the head of the urban and rural poor in opposition to all factions of the ruling class—the governing United National Party (UNP) and the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)—along with all their various allies and pseudo-left apologists.

The election takes place amid a rapidly worsening crisis of global capitalism that is fueling geo-political rivalries and the drive to world war as well as a relentless onslaught in every country on the living conditions and democratic rights of the working class.

The depth of the economic crisis is most graphically exposed in Greece, where the institutions of European and international finance capital have made clear they will brook no opposition to their demands for ever deeper austerity. The betrayal of the Syriza government is transforming Greece into a semi-colony of the German and European banks that will have devastating consequences for the working class.

Far from being immune from the global breakdown, Sri Lanka is the concentrated expression of these international processes. As in Greece, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is demanding deep inroads into government spending and sweeping pro-market measures that will produce further impoverishment and social misery. Both the UNP and SLFP-led coalitions are committed to these austerity targets.

Furthermore, the accelerating US drive to war against Russia and China confronts the international working class with immense dangers. The military buildup of the US and its allies on the borders of Russia and throughout Asia against China is creating a tinderbox where a minor incident or miscalculation can rapidly mushroom into a conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

The SEP's election campaign in Sri Lanka is an integral part of the fight by the International Committee of the Fourth International to build an anti-war movement of the international working class, which is the only means for halting the descent

into war.

Washington's intrigues and provocations against China have exacerbated political tensions in countries throughout Asia. In Sri Lanka, the US, assisted by India, exploited the January 8 presidential election to oust Mahinda Rajapakse, who developed close economic and political ties with China, and install Maithripala Sirisena.

The regime-change operation, engineered with the assistance of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, was backed by sections of the ruling elite concerned about growing danger of retribution from Washington. Sirisena appointed Wickremesinghe as prime minister and took steps to shift foreign policy behind Washington and its allies in the region.

Over the past six months, the political crisis in Colombo has only deepened. The plans of Sirisena and his co-conspirators for a whirlwind 100 days in office, a few handouts and a quick victory in a general election were rapidly undone by the worsening global economic breakdown and the IMF's refusal to grant a new loan without huge reductions in government spending.

Broken election promises have fuelled widespread discontent among working people. The limited pay rises for public employees and pensioners, and minor welfare measures, have not compensated for the deep erosion of living standards. The government has refused to back a wage increase for private sector workers, provoking a go-slow protest by tens of thousands of plantation workers for higher wages.

All the pseudo-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), United Socialist Party (USP) and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP)—in one way or another supported Sirisena's election as the “democratic” alternative to the Rajapakse “dictatorship.”

The democratic façade has been rapidly stripped away as the government deployed the military to break a strike by health workers and used the police to crack down on student protests. Most recently, Sirisena revived the draconian Press Council, which has powers to censor and penalise journalists.

The government has also tacitly backed the victimisation of seven workers by the management of Glenugie tea plantation, operating in league with the police and the trade unions, for waging a campaign against the boosting of production quotas.

The growing hostility among workers and youth to the UNP-

led government has encouraged Rajapakse, who was deeply despised for his attacks on democratic rights and living standards, to attempt a political come-back. Openly critical of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe for “blocking” Chinese investment, he represents sections of the ruling class who view China as the means of resolving their economic woes.

In ever-more strident terms, Rajapakse is whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism and accusing the government of undermining “the freedom of motherland won in the war” against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Rajapakse’s campaign to become the prime ministerial candidate for the SLFP is threatening to tear the party apart. Even though he joined with the UNP to stand against Rajapakse in January, Sirisena remained in the SLFP and, as the country’s president, is formally party leader. As the government’s popularity has waned, Rajapakse has gained the ascendancy and been able to pressure Sirisena to allow him to have an SLFP nomination.

Wickremesinghe and Kumaratunga have been lobbying Sirisena intensely to use his position as SLFP leader to autocratically thwart Rajapakse’s nomination. Behind these “democrats” undoubtedly lies the US, which will stop at nothing to prevent Rajapakse’s return to power. In what amounts to a pledge to Washington, Sirisena recently declared that would not allow the “silent revolution” of January 8 to be reversed.

The SEP and its candidates will campaign in the August 17 election for workers and youth to make a complete political break with both factions of the political establishment, which offer nothing but war, austerity and further attacks on democratic rights. The working class can only defend its interests if it begins to mobilise independently and rouse the urban and rural poor in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies.

It is also necessary to reject all those parties and groups that have sought to shackle the working class to one or other section of the ruling class. In the January election, the pseudo-left organisations—the NSSP, USP and FSP—along with various liberal groups such as Puravesi Balaya (Citizens Power) and Movement for Social Justice and Democracy, supported the US-backed operation against Rajapakse in the name of democracy, good governance and eliminating nepotism.

Now these same organisations are decrying Sirisena’s “great betrayal” for failing to use his powers as SLFP leader to anti-democratically block Rajapakse and his supporters from standing in the election. Amid widespread popular disaffection with both the SLFP and UNP, these groups are manoeuvring to prepare a new trap for workers and youth in the name of “halting the Rajapakse dictatorship.”

Likewise, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which backed the Rajapakse government until the LTTE’s defeat in 2009 and has aligned with the UNP-led government during the past six months, painting it in democratic colours, is now

posturing as an alternative to both. The main aim of its campaign for “clean rule” is to convince the bourgeoisie that it would be more effective in imposing the agenda of austerity.

The sharpest political lesson must be drawn by the working class internationally, including in Sri Lanka, from the events in Greece. The actions of the Syriza government have shown what pseudo-left organisations will do in power. Confronted with a rising movement of the working class, Syriza has abandoned its anti-austerity posturing and capitulated completely to the demands of finance capital. Its betrayal underscores the necessity of a revolutionary struggle by the working class to abolish the capitalist system.

The SEP is standing in the election to build the necessary revolutionary leadership for the struggles ahead. As the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, it has a long, unbroken record in fighting for socialist internationalism. Throughout the country’s protracted civil conflict, the SEP consistently opposed the Colombo regime’s war drive and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from north and east, while at the same time exposing the reactionary character of the LTTE’s Tamil separatism.

The SEP and its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, advance a program to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers around the demand for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. Our socialist policies are aimed at reorganising the economy from top to bottom to meet the pressing needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. That must begin with the nationalisation of the banks, financial institutions, big enterprises and plantations under workers’ control and the repudiation of the foreign loans.

The SEP will issue an election manifesto setting out its program in more detail. We urge workers and youth who agree with our perspective to actively participate in our campaign, attend our public meetings and donate generously to our 500,000-rupee election fund. Study our program and apply to join and build the SEP as the mass party of the working class.



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