

Socialist Equality Party fields 43 candidates in Sri Lankan general elections

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka announced on Monday that it will be running 43 candidates in three electoral districts—Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya—in the August 17 general elections. Under the onerous requirements of the Sri Lankan electoral system, a party can only stand in a district if it fields an entire slate.

More than 60 political parties and over 100 independent formations—a total of 6,151 candidates—will be contesting 196 seats in the 225-member parliament. The remaining 29 seats will be filled on proportional basis from the total number national votes won by each party.

The SEP election campaign is advancing a socialist and internationalist program to mobilise the working class and the urban and rural poor against the growing threat of imperialist war and attacks on living standards and democratic rights.

The SEP slates are headed by leading party members with long-standing records of fighting for socialist internationalism. The SEP candidates include plantation and industrial workers, students, professionals, housewives, fishermen and retired teachers and bank workers.

Colombo district has 5.6 million people and includes the capital Colombo, Sri Lanka's largest city. The district is home to a diverse Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim population and has 1.6 million registered voters. Colombo is Sri Lanka's financial centre and location of the nation's main harbour with significant sections of the working class concentrated in the city and surrounding suburbs.

The former government of President Mahinda Rajapakse initiated a scheme that claimed to transform Colombo into a major Asian "commercial and tourist hub." The project involved the brutal eviction of tens of

thousands of poor families to make way for high-rise commercial buildings, luxury hotels, condominiums and leisure parks.

The SEP has systematically campaigned among the poor and other workers in Colombo against the evictions. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the party's student and youth organisation, conducts regular political campaigns on the four universities in and around Colombo.

Vilani Peiris, 67, an SEP Political Committee member, heads the Colombo list. Having joined the SEP's forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), in 1969 at the age of 21, she has devoted her entire adult life to the fight for the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Peiris is a member of the WSWs Editorial Board in Colombo and regularly writes for the WSWs on the government attacks on the working class and oppressed masses and other social and political issues. She has led the party's campaign against the Colombo evictions and several workers' inquiries conducted by the SEP/RCL. This includes the recent Independent Workers Inquiry into water pollution at Weliveriya, where the previous Rajapakse government mobilised the military to suppress a mass protest against industrial contamination of local water supplies. Two students and a young worker were killed and dozens of others were injured in the military attack.

Nuwara Eliya is the main plantation district in the Central Hills and has a majority of Tamil-speaking tea plantation workers. The district has more than half a million registered voters, including Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers.

Plantation workers are among the most oppressed sections of Sri Lanka's working class. They are subjected to continuous attacks on their living standards

and democratic rights by plantation companies and the government in collaboration with the trade unions. Plantation workers are currently waging a “Go Slow” campaign to demand an increase their daily wage to 1,000 rupees (\$US7.50).

The SEP/RCL, which has a consistent and principled record of fighting to defend plantation workers, is currently campaigning to defend seven victimised workers from Deeside Division of Glenugie Estate in Maskeliya. The tea plantation workers have been witch-hunted by management for their leading role in strike action in February against an increase in daily tea-plucking targets. The SEP is winning important support among plantation workers for its campaign, which is being conducted in defiance of thuggery by plantation union leaders who are openly collaborating with Glenugie Estate management.

SEP Political Committee member **M. Thevarajah**, 62, is leading the SEP slate in Nuwara Eliya. He joined the RCL in 1976, aged 23, and in 1984 resigned from his job as a local government department technical officer to join the party’s full-time staff.

Thevarajah has been instrumental in the RCL/SEP’s struggle among Tamil speaking workers and youths in northern Sri Lanka and in the plantations. He has also been involved in several international speaking assignments for the SEP to mobilise the international working class against the protracted communal war waged by successive Colombo governments against Tamil masses.

Jaffna is the main district in the Northern Province and remains under Sri Lankan military occupation. The vast majority of more than half a million registered voters in the district are Tamil speaking. Thousands of people rendered homeless by Colombo’s three-decade war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), are still living in makeshift camps.

Paramu Thirugnanasampanthar, 45, a leading SEP member from northern Sri Lanka and a regular WSWS correspondent, heads the SEP slate in Jaffna. He joined the party in 1992, at the age of 22 at the height of the government’s bloody war against the LTTE.

Sampanthar has played a key role in the SEP’s struggle for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers on a socialist and internationalist program against Colombo’s anti-Tamil war and the LTTE’s separatist policies. Targeted by the LTTE for his principled

struggle, he was arrested in 1998 and jailed 50 days by the separatists, along with three other SEP members. They were released only after an extensive international campaign through the WSWS by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections.



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