

Sri Lankan SEP holds inaugural election meeting in Colombo

Our correspondents

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held their first election meeting in Colombo on July 17. The SEP is running election slates in Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya—three of the country's 22 districts—with a total of 43 candidates in the forthcoming August 17 general election.

Held at the Colombo Public Library Auditorium, the public meeting was attended by about one hundred people, including students and youth, as well as public and private sector workers. SEP speakers explained the crisis of bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka, pointing to its roots in global geo-political tensions and the increasingly fragile world economy. Speakers outlined the socialist program that the working class and oppressed must fight for in struggle against all the capitalist parties and their pseudo-left hangers on.

SEP political committee member Pani Wijesiriwardene chaired the meeting. He explained that Sri Lanka was being dragged into deepening geo-political tensions and conflict.

President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in the January 8 presidential election as part of a US-orchestrated regime-change operation to remove Mahinda Rajapakse, Wijesiriwardene told the meeting. The US was angered over Rajapakse's close ties with Beijing and wanted him removed as part of its "pivot" to Asia and preparations for war against China, he said.

"US Secretary of State John Kerry welcomed the shift, declaring, 'Now Sri Lanka is back on the track. The US is ready to work closely with Sri Lanka.' Washington is using Ukraine to increase its provocations against Russia while exploiting territorial disputes between Beijing and US Asia-Pacific allies in the East and South China Seas. This is intensifying the danger of a world war," the speaker warned.

SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris, who heads the party's election slate in Colombo, explained that the pseudo-left organisations, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the United Socialist Party (USP) and the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), had directly or indirectly supported Sirisena's campaign in the January presidential election.

Peiris said that the moves by the ruling United National Party (UNP) government to closely integrate Sri Lanka with the US-led war drive against China posed serious dangers for the working class. She warned against the divisive anti-Tamil chauvinism being whipped up in the campaign by former President Rajapakse.

"All the bourgeois parties in this election," she said, "are committed to providing cheap labour conditions for local and foreign investors. The UNP is committed to Rajapakse's plans to transform Colombo into a commercial and tourist hub, which led to the eviction of tens of thousands of poor families."

Pankaja Jayawickrema, an IYSSE university branch leader and also an SEP candidate in Colombo, exposed how the FSP-controlled Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) had lined up behind the Sirisena government. "IUSF convener Najith Indika wrote to Sirisena pleading for 'some democratic reforms under your provisional government.' The IUSF painted the Sirisena government in 'democratic' colours, but when it deployed police against protesting university students, it simply lamented that the government was attacking students."

Delivering the main report, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias commented on the debased media reportage of the election. In the weeks leading up to the declaration of the presidential election, the media speculated on who would be the opposition candidate.

After the January poll, it concentrated on the arrests of those who misused public funds during Rajapakse's rule and most recently on whether Rajapakse would be nominated in the general election, Dias said. "The entire discussion has nothing to do with the pressing issues confronting working people and the poor."

Dias said that the SEP's general election campaign was based on the political analysis developed in the January presidential election. "Our struggle is for the fight for international socialism against the danger of imperialist war and social counter-revolution. The only change in the situation since January is that the war danger and austerity measures have been further aggravated. Sri Lanka is not immune from the maelstrom of war tensions in the Asia-Pacific region," he said.

The speaker pointed to the treacherous role of pseudo-lefts who have openly lined up with the pro-US UNP and thus the imperialist war drive. Dias quoted NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne, who wrote in his weekly column in *Lakkima* on November 23: "The worker who broke from [Rajapakse's] government is reluctant to rally with the UNP immediately. They therefore can make their bridge [to the UNP] through left parties outside the government."

Dias said that when Sirisena was elected, the pseudo-left claimed he was a democrat who would eliminate the executive presidency. "Nothing of that sort has happened. Instead, they are now pressuring Sirisena to utilise anti-democratic methods to block Rajapakse."

Turning to the growing danger of war in South Asia, Dias said: "The US has aggressively moved to forge close ties with India as its strategic partner in the region. This has led to an escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan, both nuclear powers. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's moves in the region to counter China have been encouraged by the US.

"Sirisena has declared that whoever comes to power in the August elections, he will not allow any reversal of the program he advanced in January. This means that he will deepen the line-up with US imperialism's agenda. The move by the pseudo-left and the trade union bureaucracies to block Rajapakse's attempts to return to power is not just aimed at returning the UNP to government, but at subjugating the masses to the war plans of US imperialism."

Dias concluded by appealing to workers and youth in the audience to assist with the SEP's election campaign and join the party and take forward its struggle to mobilise workers against the growing danger of imperialist war. The Colombo audience responded warmly to Dias and the speeches by the SEP candidates, contributing over 13,000 rupees to the party's 500,000-rupee (\$3,740) election fund.



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