

Socialist Equality Party campaigners win support in Sri Lanka's plantation district

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters are winning important backing from workers, youth and the poor in Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya—the three election districts where the party is running candidates in the August 17 general election.

Apart from the SEP, every party contesting the election is hiding the key political issues confronting millions of Sri Lankan workers, with the media presenting the national ballot as a fight between the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and other pseudo-left groups falsely claim that the election is between democracy and dictatorship. These formations highlight the autocratic rule of former President Mahinda Rajapakse, while cynically promoting pro-US President Maithripala Sirisena and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as a “democratic” alternative.

The SEP opposes all these parties and advances a socialist and internationalist program to fight the deepening attacks on jobs, living standards and democratic rights, and the growing threat of a third world war.

Over the past week, SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) supporters spoke with workers and youth in the Nuwara Eliya district, which is located in Sri Lanka's central hills region and home to tens of thousands of tea estate workers.

SEP and IYSSE teams campaigned at Ambagamuwa village and among workers from the Carolina, Ingestre and Trillery tea estates. Villagers and workers bluntly voiced their opposition to the SLFP and the UNP. Tea estate workers denounced the trade unions, particularly the Ceylon Workers Congress which recently shut down and betrayed a “go-slow” industrial campaign for a 1,000-rupee daily wage.

Ambagamuwa village borders a number of tea estates and is close to Hatton, the second largest town in the

Nuwara Eliya electoral district. Most of the villagers are Sinhalese, with some working as public employees and others employed at the nearby tea estates. Many residents told SEP campaigners they were opposed to both the UNP and the SLFP, while some said they planned to boycott the August 17 election.

A technical officer from Ambagamuwa said: “I agree with your explanation of the world economic crisis. Under capitalism the living conditions of workers and the oppressed masses will worsen. I don't agree with UNP, SLFP and the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna]. Their policy is to maintain capitalism but I'm worried why the left parties don't come together to form a left government.”

The technical officer's suggestion that the left parties should unite was not uncommon. SEP supporters explained that these organisations were not genuine socialists but pseudo-lefts who often employed left-wing phrases but were opposed to the independent political mobilisation of the working class on a socialist program and sought to tie workers and youth to the capitalist parties.

A woman who previously worked in the Middle East commented: “First of all, I think we should understand what has happened. The Sri Lankan economy has gone from bad to worse and the situation facing the poor has further deteriorated.”

Referring to the Sirisena government's recent small salary increase for government workers, she said: “It's not enough to just increase public workers' salaries. The government should at least take steps to lower the cost of basic commodities so that we can save some money.

“When I was in the Middle East I earned about 45,000 rupees,” she explained. “This amount can also be earned working in a factory in Sri Lanka but the cost of living here is high.” Most women working abroad do so in order to build a better future for their children and loved ones.

While a worker must pay about 100,000 rupees to an agent company in order get employment overseas, the government provided no assistance, she added.

“I have yet to think about what to do in the election but I know from experience that working people are exploited. From eight hours of high output work, seven hours goes into the pockets of employers,” she said.

Carolina estate workers were involved in the recent “go-slow” wage rise campaign until it was shut down by the CWC.

T. Selvi works at a private company and is a television actor. The daughter of a plantation worker, she said: “The plantation workers were betrayed by all the trade union leaders, who used the wage struggle for their own election purposes. On previous occasions the CWC secretly signed collective agreement with companies for a small wage increase.”

Selvi was highly critical of the union leadership, including the CWC, National Union of Workers (NUW), Upcountry People’s Front (UPF), saying they used the unions to get into parliament and obtain ministerial positions. “They do not bother about workers’ lives.”

Selvi added: “I agree with you that socialism is the correct policy for liberation of workers, yet politicians like Vasudeva Nanayakkara [a former member of Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)] utter socialist phrases but he is now promoting Mahinda Rajapakse and has joined the racist campaign against Tamils.”

SEP supporters explained the historical record of politicians such as Nanayakkara and Wickremabahu Karunaratne who both backed the LSSP’s political betrayal in 1964 and then helped established the NSSP.

The NSSP had nothing to do socialism, SEP supporters said, but had variously aligned itself with the UNP, SLFP and other factions of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. Selvi purchased a copy of the *Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party*, which explains the principled political struggle conducted by the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP’s forerunner, against these pseudo-left formations.

SEP and IYSSE campaigners spoke with workers from the Ingestre and Trillery estates, near Hatton, who are mostly Tamil. The tea estate workers explained that they, together with workers from the Sinhara and Wanaka estates, opposed the CWC’s betrayal of the “go-slow” and continued the industrial action until July 18. When Ingestre workers protested outside the estate manager’s home on July 18, they were videoed and the police were called. Police used the management video to identify and

arrest seven workers.

Special Task Force (STF) police commandos were also mobilised to protect management for several days and are continuing to patrol. The use of video cameras to witch-hunt protesting workers is a new repressive tactic by the estate companies. The mobilisation of STF commandos clearly demonstrates that the Sirisena government backs the plantation companies.

R. Letchumy, an NUW member from Ingestre estate, said: “We opposed the postponement of our protest on the pretext of the election. We want a salary increase immediately. Why do all the institutions—the companies, the government, the trade unions and the media—neglect us? We don’t believe that our wages will be increased after the elections.”

Letchumy explained the difficult and seriously inadequate working conditions she faced. “We have to walk several miles to the working fields, where there is no place to sit or to have our meals and no toilets are available, and sometimes we have to drink rain water. The trade unions never come here after the elections. We’re not interested in voting this election.”

K. Thanasegaran, a CWC member from Trillery estate, said: “Our votes have sent several people to parliament but nobody talks about our salary problems in the parliament. The trade unions leaders get ministerial posts and have a comfortable life but we are suffering a lot. The trade unions get 150 rupees union dues regularly from us but they do not fight for workers’ rights.”

Referring to the government, he added: “The government has changed but we haven’t got anything. Most plantation workers voted for [President] Maithripala Sirisena but we received nothing from his 100-day program.”



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