

Sri Lanka: SEP campaigns against evictions in Colombo

Our correspondents
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An open-air election meeting held by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) at Wanathamulla, in Colombo's working-class heart, attracted workers and youth last Sunday.

SEP and International Students and Youth for Social Equality (IYSSE) teams campaigned for the meeting door-to-door in Wanathamulla and surrounding suburbs, which are home to a large young population from different ethnic backgrounds.

The SEP is fielding 43 candidates in Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara-Eliya districts in the August 17 general election in Sri Lanka.

Historically suffering from poverty, unemployment and an acute lack of public services, residents of the Wanathamulla area became the target of vicious government "slum eviction" operations in recent times.

The government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse announced the eviction of 135,000 families from the city, in order to release land for foreign and local investors. The SEP and IYSSE have been active in Wanathamulla and other parts of Colombo, defending the rights of families facing eviction since 2010. The SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), have conducted political work in the area for many decades.

President Maithripala Sirisena and the current United National Party (UNP)-led government are promising to improve the conditions of workers and the poor. Likewise, Rajapakse, who is standing for the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the other main capitalist party, is offering various pledges. As has happened many times in the past, both parties will break their promises as soon as the election is over.

Scores of workers, students and youth spoke to SEP and IYSSE teams, voicing their contempt for the two establishment parties. Many showed their interest in the

SEP's socialist program by buying publications and donating generously, despite their glaring economic hardships.

Referring to the major parties, Wimalasena, a janitor, said the same crooks banded themselves into different groups from time to time and ruled the country. Police brutality was increasingly used against poorer layers in Colombo, he said. "If an innocent youth roams around in the city with a backpack for couple of hours, that person will most likely be questioned and arrested for no reason." This was widespread in the Wanathamulla area, he said, because the police wanted to keep people intimidated.

Such is the reality of President Sirisena's promises of democracy and better living conditions.

A middle-aged woman commented: "Our basic issue is housing. None of the major political parties has an answer for it. I am fed up with those parties' politics." Now you can experience the real nature of 'good governance.' That is only another false promise."

A young high school student commented: "I can understand that it is only working people that can offer a solution to our problems. All the official parties—the UNP, SLFP and JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna]—are alike. Whoever is sent to parliament under this situation will be the same. I hope to continue the discussion with you."

Talking about the conditions of people evicted under the slum clearance program, a three-wheeler driver said: "I was born in Wanathamulla. Even my mother was born here, and I am 57 now. But our houses were taken and we will soon be forced to pay 8,000 rupees (\$US60) as rent for a house not larger than a chicken pen. Is that reasonable? These new houses are unfit for living. We don't mind paying a reasonable amount for maintenance, but at least a 600-square feet [55-square

metres] house should be given.”

The government recently constructed multi-storey apartment blocks for some evicted families. One such building has only one working lift for 400-600 residents. There are clearly visible cracks in the buildings’ outer walls, raising questions about their structural integrity. Public services are barely functional.

SEP campaigners came across overflowing manholes in the new buildings, while residents complained that they are charged excessively for water—nearly three times the rate they paid earlier.

Several SEP speakers addressed Sunday’s meeting.

Chairing the event, K.B. Mavikumbura explained that in January’s presidential election, Sirisena, with the help of the UNP and other forces, carried out a pro-US regime-change operation. Washington was opposed to the Rajapakse government’s close ties with China.

In the parliamentary election, the UNP was seeking to stabilise this government, the speaker said. Rajapakse, on the other hand, was trying to regain power, in order to resume his policies. Whoever took power would wage ruthless attacks on the working people.

Prageeth Aravinda, a IYSSE member and SEP Colombo district candidate, explained: “As part of the assault on social rights, former President Rajapakse’s regime attacked free education and sought to privatise higher education under the pressure of the International Monetary Fund’s austerity demands. The Wickremesinghe-Sirisena government is continuing the same policies.”

Vilani Peiris, the leader of the SEP’s Colombo district election slate, emphasised the long and consistent struggle waged by the SEP, and the RCL before it, for the right of workers to decent housing and other public services. She recalled that the Rajapakse regime cleared 72 acres in the area for commercial purposes, evicting hundreds of families from their houses into temporary sheds.

Peiris reminded the meeting of the betrayals of the UNP, when in opposition, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). They had promoted false hopes of gaining better housing by putting pressure on the Rajapakse government, only to ultimately advise people to accept grossly unsuitable housing units.

“It was the SEP alone that advanced a socialist solution for the housing crisis,” Peiris said. “Billions of

rupees will have to be spent to build safe, decent public housing schemes. That is incompatible with the profit system. It can be done only by implementing socialist policies under a workers’ and peasants’ government. This is part of the internationalist program for which the SEP fights.”

The speaker warned that Rajapakse was resorting to communalist propaganda. Other parties, too, would use communalism to divide the working class and implement the austerity measures demanded by international finance capital. Peiris reviewed the lessons of the SEP’s intransigent opposition to the protracted anti-Tamil communalist war waged by successive UNP and SLFP governments.

Concluding her remarks, Peiris invited workers and youth to rally behind the socialist program put forward by SEP and actively support its campaign. “Any vote casted for SEP’s scissors symbol in the general election will be a conscious vote approving this internationalist program,” she said.



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