

Socialist Equality Party holds first election meeting in Sri Lanka's north

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held its first election campaign public meeting in Kayts, an island near Jaffna in Sri Lanka's war-torn north, last Saturday. The party is running 43 candidates in the Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara-Eliya districts in the August 17 general election.

About 50 SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters held a powerful open-air meeting in a park adjacent to the Kayts market and local shops. Hundreds of shoppers and passers-by stopped to listen to the speeches by SEP election candidates. Thousands of copies of the SEP's election announcement were distributed throughout Kayts before the meeting.

The SEP is campaigning in the Jaffna district in a highly-charged political atmosphere. Five years after the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), all the basic social problems—unemployment, poverty, homelessness and lack of basic education and health facilities—confronting the majority Tamil-population remain. Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan military and security personnel continue to occupy the region.

SEP candidate and long-standing party member Rasendiran Sutharsan chaired the meeting. He said that although dozens of political parties and independent groups were contesting the election, the SEP was the only organisation advancing a socialist program against the capitalist profit system and the “one and only party warning of the danger of imperialist war.”

Next, SEP candidate Rasaratnam Balagowry warned: “Governments all over the world are unleashing attacks on the living standards of the working class and the poor.” The Sri Lankan government, she added, “is closely following US imperialism's agenda.”

Paramu Thirugnanasampanthar, the SEP's lead

candidate for the Jaffna district, said the election occurred at an important historic juncture. The working class had to come forward to build its own independent revolutionary political movement.

Thirugnanasampanthar commented on the role of the Tamil bourgeois parties, particularly the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). “While pretending to speak for the Tamil people, the TNA represents the interests of the Tamil elite and has lined up with US imperialism,” he said. “The TNA is promoting the United National Party-led ruling alliance as good government and is also participating in the National Executive Council, a top advisory body appointed by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe.

“Pseudo-left groups, such as the Front Line Socialist Party, the United Socialist Party and the Nava Sama Samaja Party, are functioning to strengthen the hands of bourgeois parties and preparing a trap to prevent the independent mobilisation of the working class.”

W.A. Sunil, a SEP candidate for Colombo and a member of the party's political committee, highlighted the political developments in Greece and the impact of finance capitalism's social attacks on Greek workers. “This is directly relevant to Sri Lanka,” he said.

“The Syriza government came to power in Greece promising to fight the austerity measures of the International Monetary Fund, the European Union and the European Central Bank,” Sunil explained. “But after seven months Syriza has repudiated these promises and is now responsible for major cuts in jobs, pension funds and other welfare spending.”

Sunil said sections of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie were discussing the austerity measures in Greece and warned that whichever party was elected to government, it would impose social austerity and police-state measures.

The SEP is well-known among Kayts workers, farmers and fishermen for its decades-long struggle for its international socialist program and consistent opposition to the communal war by successive Sri Lankan governments and their political agencies.

SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan disappeared in March 2007, while travelling along the long causeway between Punguduthivu island and Velanai in Kayts. Evidence collected by the SEP proved the involvement of the Sri Lankan navy and the associated paramilitary group, the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP).

Five years since the defeat of the LTTE, thousands of Sri Lankan security forces remain in the region, with many local islands still occupied by navy and EPDP forces.

Maithripala Sirisena's elevation as Sri Lankan president has changed nothing for farmers, fishermen, workers, students and youth in the country's north and east. Land inside military-designated High Security Zones has not been returned to the original owners. Thousands of families lack proper shelter and basic facilities. Mass unemployment and poverty dominate.

The gang rape and murder of a schoolgirl in Punguduthivu in May triggered protests by tens of thousands of local residents, reflecting the seething social anger over the situation in the north. The government responded by mobilising the police and military to quell the demonstrations, charging several people for allegedly damaging the court complex. A court order has recently been issued banning students using Internet cafes.

While the government is repaving the road to Kayts to attract tourists, basic living facilities for residents have not improved.

SEP and IYSSE members visited Melinchimuni village, about five kilometres from Kayts, which EPDP paramilitaries previously controlled. The community of about 300 fishing families has no potable water supplies, only limited drinking water from tankers.

A young mother of two children told the WSWS that the village had been continuously under EPDP control. "We don't know any other parties, apart from the EPDP, because it banned all others from entering the village," she said. "We were forced to vote for them ... The political parties say they are helping people, but none of our problems have been solved."

A fisherman said: "Whenever there's an election, the party candidates come to meet us. After the election they disappear and we have to struggle to even meet them. They're not serving the people but strengthening the government and getting benefits for themselves."

A single mother from Karainagar, an island near Kayts, said: "My children and I fell into poverty and so I had to work abroad for two years. Now that my children are older, the government officers have stopped me from going abroad again and we've fallen into poverty again. Though the government changed, nothing has changed in our lives."

R. Rasendiran, a postal worker, denounced the TNA. "Again and again the TNA advances the same program. It worked with the LTTE before it was defeated but in parliament it branded the LTTE as a terrorist group. The TNA is cheating people. It said that if they won control of the northern provincial council it would benefit the Tamil people but there's been no benefit for us."

Devan, 57, a farmer, said: "All the politicians, including TNA, make lots of promises but after the election they put them in the dustbin. The TNA is not concerned about Tamil people or their problems."

The government, he continued, "talks about good governance and democracy but none of our problems were solved. Its 100-day program, and the promises to remove the executive presidential powers, have all proven to be false. It's reduced the prices of some goods but they can increase them again after the elections like they've done in the past. President Maithripala Sirisena arrested 130 Tamil people and is increasing the military presence here.

"As you said, we're in a danger of a third world war. The US has blocked China's silk route program but China won't give up easily. Rajapakse was pro-China but the Sirisena government is acting in line with the US against China's interests. The US has also deployed its military around Russia. If there is a war against Russia, there would be a nuclear war."



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