

Manifesto of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) for the 2015 general election

Against war and austerity! Fight for a workers' and peasants' government and a socialist program!

The Socialist Equality Party
3 August 2015

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), calls on workers, youth, rural toilers and intellectuals to support our campaign for the August 17 general elections in Sri Lanka.

The SEP is standing 43 candidates, in a total of three electoral districts, Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya. The three slates are headed by longstanding members of the SEP leadership—Vilani Peiris, Paramu Thirugnanasampanthar and M. Thevarajah—and include workers, youth and pensioners, all of whom have a principled record of struggle for socialist internationalism.

The SEP is running in opposition to the United National Party (UNP), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and every other political tendency, which, in one way or another, lines up with the two main bourgeois parties. Our party is the only one that represents the interests of the working class.

The overriding purpose of the SEP's campaign is not to gather votes, but to educate and mobilise workers and youth in opposition to war and the attacks on democratic rights and living conditions. Our perspective is to lead the working class, in alliance with the oppressed masses, in revolutionary struggle to abolish capitalism and establish a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the fight for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

An election of lies and deception

In this election, the entire political and media establishment is engaged in a conspiracy against the working class. The SEP is the only party telling workers the truth: that the deepening crisis of global capitalism, which erupted in 2008, is fuelling geo-political tensions, an accelerating drive to war and social counter-revolution in every country.

Far from being exempt from these global storms, Sri Lanka is highly vulnerable to international recessionary tendencies, falling commodity prices and financial instability. The UNP and SLFP, along with their allies, shamelessly claim that if voted into power they will establish democracy, justice and economic well-being for the population.

On the contrary, these parties are committed to carrying out the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for drastic cutbacks in public spending, further privatisations and the constant lowering of living standards so as to boost the profits of global corporations. The devastating austerity measures being imposed on the Greek working class are a warning to workers everywhere that international finance capital will brook no opposition to its demands.

Deep inroads into living conditions cannot be carried out democratically. Both the UNP and SLFP have a long record of using brutal, police-state measures against their political rivals and against the

working class. Both are mired in Sinhala supremacism and bear responsibility for the quarter century of communal war that cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Whichever parties form the next government, they will not hesitate to use the security forces to try to suppress the resistance of workers and youth to the ever-escalating attacks on democratic and social rights.

The drive to war

As a result of its strategic position at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean's sea lanes, Sri Lanka has become a focus for bitter geo-political rivalries. These rose to the surface in the January presidential election. In a regime-change operation orchestrated well in advance, Washington conspired with former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to defeat Mahinda Rajapakse and install Maithripala Sirisena as president.

The US opposed Rajapakse not because of his anti-democratic methods of rule, nor the atrocities for which his government was responsible in its military offensives against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Rather, Washington was deeply antagonistic towards the economic and political ties that his government had forged with China.

The regime-change operation in Sri Lanka formed part of the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—a comprehensive strategy aimed at undermining Beijing diplomatically throughout Asia and ensuring continued American economic dominance and the military encirclement of China. Washington has recklessly inflamed territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas, putting the entire region on a hair trigger. An accident or miscalculation by either side has the potential to plunge Asia and the world into a catastrophic conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

Every country is being drawn into this geo-political maelstrom. The US has encouraged Vietnam, the Philippines and Japan to take a more aggressive stance over their maritime disputes with China, while Australia is being turned into a platform for American military forces. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is strengthening its military ties with the US—moves that will only heighten tensions with Pakistan. As for Sri Lanka, Washington wants to turn it into a strategic outpost in the Indian Ocean as part of American war plans to cut off Chinese supplies of energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

The drive to war is the product of the irresolvable contradictions of capitalism: between world economy and the outmoded nation-state system, and between social production and the private ownership of the means of production. In response to the global economic crisis and its own historic decline, US imperialism is resorting to military means to maintain its world hegemony.

War is inevitable without the revolutionary intervention of the working class to abolish the profit system, the root cause of national rivalries and military conflict. The SEP's election campaign is an integral part of the political struggle being waged by the ICFI and its sections to unite the working class of all countries in an international anti-war movement to halt the plunge toward a third world war.

Political crisis in Colombo

These geo-political tensions have fuelled deep divisions over foreign policy within the Sri Lankan ruling elite. The minority UNP-led government appointed by President Sirisena and led by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe has turned sharply toward Washington, as underscored by US Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Colombo in May. This shift has been backed by those layers of the ruling class that fear the economic and diplomatic repercussions of incensing Washington if the government were to orient towards Beijing.

In the past seven months, however, public hostility toward Sirisena and the UNP government has risen sharply, as one election promise after another has been broken and living standards continue to deteriorate. As a result, Rajapakse has been emboldened to stand in the general election and make a bid to return to power as prime minister. Sections of big business that profited from China's substantial investment projects, some of which the UNP has put on hold, are supporting him.

The political battle between Rajapakse and Sirisena for control of the SLFP is tearing this longstanding bourgeois party apart. Rajapakse is whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism by boasting that he defeated the LTTE and accusing the UNP of threatening the unity and security of the island. While cautious in his criticism of the US and its allies, he has made a pitch to voters by declaring that he will restart Chinese projects, boost the economy and provide jobs and better living standards.

Having engineered Rajapakse's ouster in January, the US will neither tolerate his return as prime minister, nor the restoration of close ties with Beijing. Washington will have no scruples in ensuring that Rajapakse's bid for power fails. Sirisena has already declared that he will not appoint Rajapakse as prime minister, even if the SLFP wins a majority. Such a move would be blatantly unconstitutional and could only be enforced with the backing of the military and state apparatus.

Should Rajapakse win, the stage is being set for a ferocious campaign, supported by Washington and its allies, to denounce the result and demand his removal. Another US-backed "colour revolution" is in the making. A large array of upper middle class formations—including non-government organisations, liberal groupings, academics—are lining up behind the UNP and its so-called United National Front for Good Governance, just as they did behind Sirisena in January.

In opposing the machinations of the US and its political allies in Colombo, the SEP gives no support whatsoever to Rajapakse, who was responsible for the military's war crimes costing the lives of tens of thousands of civilians and gross abuses of democratic rights, including the use of the security forces to suppress the resistance of workers and youth to his government's austerity measures. We insist that the working class can only defend its social and democratic rights by mobilising independently of all factions of the ruling class in the fight for a socialist and internationalist program.

The pseudo-left organisations

The most insidious role is being played by the pseudo-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the United Socialist Party (USP) and the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP)—which functioned as cheerleaders for the "democratic revolution" in January and denounced the Rajapakse government as a "fascist dictatorship." Directly or indirectly, they are all supporting the UNP in the current election campaign.

The integration of the pseudo-lefts into the Colombo political establishment has been epitomised by the appointment of NSSP leader

Wickremabahu Karunaratne to the top government advisory body—the National Executive Council—where he shamelessly acts as its chief propagandist. His endless calls for the continuation of the January "democratic revolution" seek to provide a progressive coloration to anti-working class figures like Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, and to lay the ground for a colour revolution against Rajapakse.

The fact that the NSSP, USP and FSP held up the Syriza government in Greece as a model for Sri Lanka is a warning to workers and youth. In the space of just months, Syriza completely abandoned its anti-austerity pledges, ignored the overwhelming 'no' vote of the Greek people on July 5 and imposed the European Union's draconian austerity measures. By supporting the UNP, the Sri Lankan pseudo-lefts are preparing their own betrayal of the working people.

The UNP is the oldest party of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, steeped in Sinhala communalism and crimes against the working class. It was responsible for launching the civil war in 1983 with an island-wide anti-Tamil pogrom, in which hundreds of people were killed. In the late 1980s, the UNP government let loose military-organised death squads against its de-facto ally, the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and slaughtered an estimated 60,000 rural Sinhalese youth. Since January, it has already used the security forces against striking health workers and protesting students, and supported the victimisation of plantation workers.

The JVP, which was formed on the basis of Castroite guerillaism, has long ago exchanged its weapons for parliamentary seats and has become fully integrated into the Colombo establishment. Having backed Rajapakse's election in 2005, it is now lining up with the UNP. The JVP supported Sirisena's election in January and is also represented on the National Executive Council. While standing its own candidates in this election, the JVP leaders are directing their propaganda against the SLFP, while remaining largely uncritical of the UNP.

A worsening economic and social crisis

The SEP warns that whatever the political make-up of the next government, it will seek to impose the burdens of the deepening economic crisis onto the backs of working people.

The relatively high official rates of economic growth present a false picture. The economy has been propped up by infrastructure spending on roads, high-rise buildings and hotels, and parasitic speculation in property and on the share market—which will inevitably collapse. A balance of payments crisis is looming as exports of tea and apparel fall.

After the IMF refused to grant a new \$4 billion loan and demanded deeper spending cuts, the government was forced to turn to more expensive borrowing, compounding its escalating foreign debt. The finance minister declared in May that government debt-servicing expenditure was "extremely high" and consumed 95.4 percent of revenue. Also in May, former President Kumaratunga warned that the government was on the verge of bankruptcy and might not be able to pay public sector salaries.

In the election campaign, the SLFP and UNP are both boasting that, in government, they presided over high economic growth. In reality, both parties carried out the IMF's economic restructuring agenda that boosted the profits of the wealthy few at the expense of the rest of the population.

Officially, poverty has been reduced to 6.7 percent of the population. But if the poverty level is lifted from a starvation \$1 to \$2 per day, 23 percent live in poverty. Half the country's workforce is forced to labour in poorly-paid temporary and casual jobs, and their wages do not match the sharply rising prices for food and other essentials. Institute of Policy Studies researchers recently presented data showing that a quarter of the population is undernourished.

A small well-off layer live in luxury homes, drive late-model cars and think nothing of spending on one meal what poor families subsist on for a month. According to the most recent figures, the richest 20 percent of households receive 53.5 percent of total income, while the poorest 20

percent obtain only 4.4 percent.

What is being prepared as soon as the election is over has been most clearly demonstrated in Greece, where European and international finance capital has insisted on the complete dismantling of essential services—public health, education, pensions, jobs and welfare payments. The next Sri Lankan government will not hesitate to use the police-state apparatus built up during the island's civil war against the working class. The current victimisation of plantation workers at the Deeside and Ingestre tea estates over their campaign for a pay rise must sound the warning for workers everywhere.

A revolutionary socialist program for the working class

The SEP insists that the working class cannot defend its democratic and social rights without establishing its political independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie—the UNP as well as the SLFP—and their partners, hangers-on and pseudo-left apologists. Only a unified movement of workers can lead the oppressed masses in a revolutionary struggle for power and the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

The SEP calls on workers and youth to reject all forms of nationalism and communalism—both the Sinhala chauvinism of the UNP, SLFP, JVP and their allies, and the Tamil separatism of the various Tamil bourgeois parties, such as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA). While the UNP and SLFP are directly responsible for a quarter century of murderous civil war, the communal politics of the LTTE have proved to be a disastrous dead-end for the Tamil people.

The LTTE represented not the Tamil workers and oppressed, but the venal Tamil elite. As the Sri Lankan army intensified its offensive in 2009, the LTTE was incapable of making any class appeal to the Tamil workers and peasants, who were alienated by its repressive methods of rule, let alone any broader appeal to the working class in the rest of the island, in India and around the world. It was, instead, reduced to futile appeals to the “international community”—that is, to the US, India and the European Union, which were backing Colombo and its criminal war. The LTTE's defeat was primarily the result of its politics, not its lack of military means.

The TNA, which functioned as the LTTE's parliamentary wing, has, since 2009, sought to manoeuvre with the Colombo political establishment to carve out a privileged position for the Tamil elites. Having won control of the Northern Provincial Council, it has accommodated itself to the ongoing military occupation of Jaffna and tried to transform the province into a cheap labour platform for investors. It has done little or nothing to address the lack of jobs, services and shelter. In this election, while standing its own candidates, the TNA is giving tacit support to the UNP and making clear it will work with Washington.

The SEP is the only party that has fought to unite workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—on the basis of an international socialist perspective. The SEP, and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), consistently opposed the communal war waged by successive Colombo governments and demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of troops from the North and East of the island. Our perspective is embodied in the fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally.

The SEP program is based on Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, the truth of which has been graphically demonstrated by the utter inability of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to meet any of the aspirations of working people for democratic rights and decent living standards. Only the working class, by mobilising the rural masses behind it, can carry out the unresolved democratic tasks as part of its struggle for socialism.

The SEP and its candidates are fighting for the following policies in this election campaign:

* We call for the disbanding of the entire security apparatus and the abolition of the country's anti-democratic, communal constitution and all repressive laws. A new constitution must be drawn up through a democratically-elected constituent assembly.

* To assure jobs for unemployed youth, we propose the expansion of employment opportunities through the reduction of the working week to 30 hours, without any loss of pay. A massive public works program must be launched to create well-paid jobs and meet the urgent need for public housing, schools, hospitals and roads.

* The contract labour system, which has been used to undermine the pay and conditions of the working class as a whole, must be abolished. All workers must have the right to secure, well-paid jobs. Pay must be immediately raised to a living wage, and indexed against inflation.

* The SEP calls for billions of rupees to be spent on expanding public education and health care to make free, high-quality services available to all. Public housing must be greatly increased to provide decent accommodation at affordable rates.

* We advocate allocating state lands to all landless farmers, regardless of ethnicity. The debts of all poor farmers and fishermen must be cancelled immediately and cheap credit, technical advice and other assistance made available. Prices for their products must be guaranteed to assure them a decent standard of living.

The above policies are not compatible with the economic domination of the large corporations and banks, which must be nationalised under the democratic control of working people. Foreign loans must be repudiated. Society as a whole must be re-organised from top to bottom on socialist lines to meet the pressing needs of the majority, not the profits of a tiny super-wealthy elite.

We call on workers, the rural poor, youth and intellectuals to support our political campaign. Join our campaign teams, attend our meetings and donate financially to our election fund. Vote for the SEP in Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya. Above all, we urge you to carefully study our political perspective and program, and apply to join the SEP and build it as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.



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