Sri Lankan irrigation department residents discuss SEP policies

Our correspondent
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Socialist Equality Party supporters campaigned among Ratmalana irrigation department housing residents and local workers last week as part of the SEP's intervention into the country's general election on August 17. The area is about 15 kilometres south of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, one of the three electoral districts where the SEP is fielding candidates. The SEP is also running in the Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya electoral districts.

The Irrigation Department was formed during British colonial rule with a mandate to establish large- and medium-scale irrigation schemes and introduce flood control and sanitation measures. In post-independence Sri Lanka, its main responsibility was to provide water to state-run agricultural projects and farmers. After the introduction in 1977 of so-called "open economic" policies most of the government-funded agencies were either privatised or, in the case of the Irrigation Department, run down and downsized through various "restructuring" programs.

While the Ratmalana irrigation housing scheme has about 300 homes, many are in serious disrepair or have become unlivable due to lack of Irrigation Department maintenance. Residents are charged a monthly rent of between 1,000 to 2,000 rupees ($7.50–$15), which is deducted from their salaries, with separate payments for water and electricity.

Several members of the same family often work for the Irrigation Department, but on retirement they have to vacate the department homes. Many have relocated to run-down tin-shed dwellings situated nearby.

One woman living in one of the tin sheds said: "My father worked in the Irrigation Department but we became homeless after his retirement and so we've been living in this hut for 20 years."

Explaining her plight, she said: "I don't have a job and my husband is a casual labourer. We somehow send our kids to the school but there are unending demands for money, even at the schools. My husband's earnings are not sufficient to meet those needs. Some families in this area receive Samurdhi aid [government social security] but that is only 250 rupees per month and less than half of our daily household expenses."

Many workers in the area faced financial difficulties.

An 18-year-old garment worker from nearby Angulana said: "Our shifts are from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and my [monthly] salary is only 12,500 rupees, which is just enough for my personal needs. I was only able to remain at school until Grade 9 but some children in this area can't go even that far."

Amila, whose husband is a municipal worker, said that even after receiving a recent 7,000-rupee salary increase her husband still only earned 30,000 rupees per month.

"I have three school-age children and their class fees cost 3,000 rupees per month. Our water bill is 500 rupees and the electricity bill exceeds 1,000 rupees. Other expenses for the children's health and education are sizable. Even if we go to a government hospital we have to buy most medicines from private pharmacies."

She explained that her husband previously drove a three-wheeler taxi and borrowed money to purchase the vehicle. "Monthly debt repayments are 10,000 rupees so living is becoming difficult day by day," she said.

Amila's house is on state-owned land. She pointed out that if the squatter evacuation program initiated by the previous Rajapakse government resumed, her home could be demolished. On the other hand, she continued, if Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party wins the election, her husband might lose his job because he was employed under the Rajapakse regime.

Nimal, who has serious health problems and lives

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with his wife Burani in poverty-stricken conditions, voiced his disgust with all the major political parties.

"The media and various artists are asking us to vote for candidates who are educated, uncorrupt and not connected to rackets such as drug dealing. Even if such candidates exist we'll still have to vote for the same crooked and disgusting parties that governed us for decades. Of course, whether such uncorrupt candidates exist is another question altogether."

Nimal's wife is employed at the Burani polythene factory nearby, where she works long hours for poverty-level wages: "I work from 8 a.m. till 6 p.m. for just 400 rupees per day. Next door to our factory is the Sirasa media channel. They pretend to talk about everybody's problems but not a word about our problem, which is just next door."

Edissooriya, who is employed in the Irrigation Department's Water Science section, spoke to SEP campaigners while eating his evening meal. He had just returned from the departments' head office, about 12 kilometres and an hour travelling time from Ratmalana.

"See what time we get home," he said. "We are not paid enough for the work we do and although there are trade unions, which are connected to the UPFA [United People's Freedom Alliance] and the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna], they just keep quiet. The only consolation for us is the allowances we receive when we go to the outstations. But then we have to rough it and our families suffer."

Pradeep, a shop assistant asked SEP supporters about the party's election intervention and its socialist program.

SEP campaigners said that the SEP, in opposition to all the big business parties and their allies, was fighting for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies. The SEP was intervening in the elections, they continued, in order to warn the working class of the danger of imperialist war, pointing out that Sri Lanka was being drawn into Washington's "pivot to Asia" and war preparations against China.

Pradeep voiced his disgust with the official election campaign. "The multi-millionaire candidates from big parties spend hundreds of thousands to distribute food parcels, alcohol and money asking for preferential votes."

Under Sri Lanka's proportional preferential election system, the candidate with the highest number of votes in a party list is elected. Pradeep named one candidate who had distributed bribes, adding: "For poor people, the election has become an opportunity to earn some money by pasting posters, hanging up cut-outs and distributing leaflets!"

"We got nothing from this government or the former Alliance [United People's Freedom Alliance] government. Now they talk about the Rajapakse government's corruption but many of those in the UNP government came from Rajapakse government. Sirisena is one of them. We agree with the working class taking power and like your idea about workers' and peasants' government."

SEP campaigners spoke to an Irrigation Department water surveying worker. He was busy with his wife making "short-eats"—small food snacks—which they sell to supplement the family income.

"I get a salary of around 22,000 rupees, even after a recent 5,000-rupee increase from this government. Half of that goes on deductions for loans so I have to do something like this—making and selling short-eats—to make ends meet," he said.

"I'm a member of the JVP union but I'm not sure whether to vote for them in this election or not. It would be good if socialism can be built."

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