Sri Lanka: SEP's final election meeting warns of sharp struggles ahead

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held their final meeting for yesterday's parliamentary election at Colombo's Public Library auditorium on August 14. Around 150 members and supporters, and other workers, housewives, students and youth, participated.

The SEP fielded slates totalling 43 candidates in three districts—Colombo, the capital, Nuwara Eliya in the central hills plantation area and Jaffna in the war-ravaged northern province. The party campaigned in workers' neighbourhoods, universities and workplaces, holding vital discussions on the implications of the election. The SEP is fighting to mobilise workers and youth against the growing threat of world war and social counter-revolution by the ruling elite, which is acting on the diktats of international finance capital.

Using officially allocated time slots, Vilani Peiris, an SEP political committee member and leader of the Colombo district SEP slate, spoke on the National TV channel and Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) radio. M. Thevarajah, SEP political committee member and the leader of the slate for the Nuwara Eliya district, spoke on the same channels in the Tamil language. SEP general secretary Wije Dias was interviewed on the SLBC's national election channel.

Apart from that, the government-controlled and corporate media imposed a total blackout on the SEP campaign, reflecting the uneasiness in the Colombo political establishment over the party's socialist platform.

Chairing the Colombo meeting, Peiris explained that the SEP had mounted a broad political campaign and which included extensive coverage and comments on the *World Socialist Web Site*. "The world economic crisis of capitalism has found a sharp expression in the Sri Lankan election, just as it has in Greece," she said. "This is because Sri Lanka is situated on highly important international sea routes, through which raw materials from Africa and Asia are transported to China."

Pointing to the geo-strategic tensions underpinning the election, Peiris quoted from an Indian think tank article by Brahma Chellaney who reflects the interests of Washington and New Delhi. "In the coming election, Sri Lankan voters will effectively decide whether their country should kowtow to China's regional ambitions or shape its own destiny by promoting an independent foreign policy and an open economy. One hopes that they choose the latter option. Sri Lanka is, after all, more than a 'swing state' in the competition for maritime supremacy among China, India and the US."

IYSSE convener Kapila Fernando contrasted the official election debates with the bleak conditions facing youth. "The disagreements amongst sections of the ruling class are only tactical and mainly over foreign policy," he said, warning of a tense situation after the election. Fernando said the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party and its student appendage, the Inter University Students' Federation, covered up the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's pro-US agenda by appealing for it to "carry out at least limited reforms."

Thevarajah exposed the manoeuvres conducted by the Tamil bourgeois parties with the major capitalist parties. "While the SEP has been engaged in unrelenting struggle against both Sinhala chauvinism and Tamil separatism, these organisations try their best to hoodwink the Tamil masses and youth," he said. Thevarajah also laid bare the undemocratic methods employed against the SEP by plantation trade unions-cum-political parties like the National Union of

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Workers, led by P. Digambaram, a cabinet minister.

Pankaja Jayawickrema, an IYSSE university branch leader and SEP candidate in Colombo, said all the major parties attempted to cheat students and youth. He gave an account of the various promises offered in government and opposition party manifestos. Jayawickrema warned students and youth not to have "any faith in those promises because these parties are notorious for giving and breaking them." Despite ex-President Mahinda Rajapakse's boasts of lowering unemployment under his rule, the reality was the opposite, the speaker explained.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias said the SEP's main concern was to educate and politically prepare the working class for its historic tasks: to prevent another imperialist world war and found a new international socialist system.

"This task has become all the more urgent today, under conditions in which US imperialism, as the strongest military power, threatens to assert its global domination even at the expense of the existence of world humanity through the use of nuclear weapons against its rivals," Dias explained.

"What the international working class needs, most of all, is a revolutionary strategy to confront and defeat these barbaric preparations of imperialism. This is why all the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution, are prioritising in their day-to-day struggles the building of a world anti-war movement and mass mobilisations on a socialist perspective to defeat the austerity programs of finance capital."

By contrast, Dias said, pseudo-left groups urge people to place their hopes in capitalist political frauds, including the false promises given during election times. The speaker refuted the accusations of one such group, the United Socialist Party (USP), that the SEP "makes no effort whatsoever to take part in the day-to-day struggles of the workers." Dias explained that the USP's charge that SEP members preached the "purity of socialism" from the "comfort" of their homes expressed the utter hostility of all the pseudo-lefts toward principled revolutionary politics.

Dias said the USP's allegation recalled a similar accusation made by the opportunist tendency within the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India's Sri Lankan unit in 1943. At that time, Phillip Gunawardena and N. M. Perera branded the principled Trotskyist fighters, who rejected a compromise with radical middle class elements, as "parlour Bolsheviks." There was an important lesson to be drawn from their subsequent political evolution, Dias said. These opportunists ended up joining the bourgeois Bandaranaike governments—Gunawardena in 1956 and Perera in 1964.

Dias denounced the claims by upper-layers of the middle class and privileged intellectuals that President Sirisena would usher in democracy. He said Sirisena's latest act in using the courts to oust the incumbent secretaries of his own parties—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and its United People's Freedom Alliance—and replace them with his loyalists, revealed once again the undemocratic character of his rule. In fact, the introduction of new measures to strengthen the state machinery, through the use of bogus anti-corruption campaigns, was a well-tested tactic of the ruling classes in preparation for more severe repression against the working people.

Dias said Ruwan Wijewardena, the Sirisena government's deputy defence minister, had already called for a stronger "law and order" regime in Sri Lanka's Tamil-majority North and East, even as the capitalist Tamil National Alliance pledged to collaborate with any government formed in Colombo after the election. In an interview published in the *Daily Mirror*, Wijewardena said: "Law and order in the North has to be tightened. I think the police need to be given more priority and more powers in that area."

Dias concluded: "The preparations for imperialist war and social counter-revolution cannot be defeated by a vote in a parliamentary election. That is why we call on all of you to join the struggle to build a mass revolutionary party to establish a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam on an internationalist perspective."

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