

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) stands for local government elections

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka will stand for three councils in the upcoming local government elections, fielding 61 candidates. Elections for 341 local bodies, including municipalities, urban councils and Pradeshiya Sabha (divisional councils), are scheduled for February 10.

The SEP is fielding a slate of 23 candidates for the Kolonnawa Urban Council, near the capital city of Colombo, headed by Vilani Peiris, a long-standing SEP political committee member. A slate of 24, led by SEP political committee member M. Thevarajah, is standing for the Ambagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabha near Hatton in the central plantation district. P. Sambandan, another SEP political committee member, is leading a list of 16 candidates for Kayts in the war-ravaged northern Jaffna Peninsula.

Our candidates include party members and supporters drawn from workers and youth who have unblemished records of fighting for international socialist policies within the working class, youth and rural poor.

The SEP is the only party contesting the elections on the basis of an internationalist and socialist program against the threat of an imperialist third world war, the government's austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and attacks on democratic rights.

President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe repeatedly postponed the local government elections for more than two years. They were eventually compelled to call the elections amid public criticisms of the government's anti-democratic moves.

The government made various excuses for the postponements, such as awaiting a report on electoral boundaries and preparing a new local government elections act. However, the real reason was fear that the coalition government of Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Wickremesinghe's United National

Party (UNP) would face a backlash from workers and the poor.

Sirisena came to power in the January 2015 presidential election, ousting former President Mahinda Rajapakse. Sirisena promised to improve living conditions, restore democratic rights and address the problems of the Tamil people in the north and east, who suffered a 26-year communal war by successive governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The pseudo-left groups, the Nava Sama Samaja Party, Frontline Socialist Party and United Socialist Party, as well as academics, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), backed Sirisena's "good governance" fraud in order to dupe workers and the poor.

Soon after taking office, Sirisena and Wickremesinghe shifted the country's foreign policy in favour of US imperialism and its regional ally India, distancing their government from China. Over the past three years, the government has integrated Sri Lanka into Washington's military buildup against Beijing, aimed at subordinating China to US hegemony, including by going to war if necessary.

In fact, the so-called good governance movement was a cover for a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington to oust Rajapakse, install Sirisena and change the country's geo-strategic alignment. Washington was not hostile to Rajapakse's authoritarian rule but his reliance on Beijing for financial assistance and to procure arms.

Three years on, the government has become thoroughly unpopular. Mired in the fallout of the global capitalist breakdown marked by the 2008 financial collapse, Sirisena's government, like Rajapakse's, turned to the IMF for bailout loans. Under IMF directives, the government has been halving fiscal expenditure as a proportion of gross domestic product from 7.5 percent in

2014 to 3.5 percent in 2020. It is increasing taxes, slashing social programs such as public education, health services and welfare subsidies, and implementing privatisations.

Opposing these attacks, during the past several months alone, tens of thousands of power, oil, rail, health and plantation workers have protested, demanding higher pay, job security and improved working conditions. On Thursday, the closing day of nominations for this election, nearly 500 sacked workers from Hambantota Port demonstrated in Colombo demanding their jobs back. They were retrenched when the government handed the port to a Chinese company.

Tamil people in the north, still military-occupied, are holding continuous protests because the government has taken no significant measures to alleviate the devastation caused by the war and the ongoing military harassment.

So far, the trade unions have scuttled workers' struggles with the help of the pseudo-left formations. In November, university students halted a months-long protest after it was betrayed by the pseudo-left leaders of the Inter-University Student Federation.

The government has resorted to violence against protesting workers, students and the poor, unleashing the military, police and goons. In July, the government imposed an essential services order and deployed the army to break an oil workers' strike. Just a week ago, the government again used the draconian essential services laws to suppress a railway strike. These police-state methods are part of moves by the ruling classes in every country toward authoritarian methods to defend the crisis-ridden capitalist order.

Each section of the Sri Lankan ruling elite is nervous about the developing struggles. Despite being in a "unity government," Sirisena's SLFP and United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) are contesting the elections separately from the UNP. The SLFP is desperately trying to show it has a different identity to the UNP, which has a majority of parliamentarians and is running the government.

Sirisena is also facing his factional rival, Rajapakse, who is leading a section of SLFP and UPFA members of parliament. Rajapakse is seeking to exploit the growing opposition to the government and build a movement to topple it. For the past several months, Sirisena and his loyal ministers have tried to woo Rajapakse's faction and mute its criticism of the government. Those discussions have failed, with the Rajapakse group demanding that the SLFP break from the government.

Rajapakse's faction is attempting to take advantage of the ruling coalition's crisis by fielding candidates under the name of a newly formed Podu Jana Party (PJP or Common Peoples Party). Rajapakse is competing with the government in inciting anti-Tamil chauvinism and appealing to the Buddhist clergy, aiming to build a communal movement to come to power and crush the working class.

The JVP backed Sirisena to take office, supposedly to oust the "dictatorship of Rajapakse" and his corruption-riddled regime. After months of directly supporting the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, the JVP is trying to distance itself from the coalition, with a slogan of defeating corruption and building village political power.

The TNA, the main Tamil bourgeois alliance, is only contesting the elections in the north and east. Though formally in opposition in the parliament, the TNA acts as a de-facto partner of the government.

Though these are local council elections, workers, young people and the poor are facing fundamental issues, like the working masses in every country. There is the looming threat of a global military conflagration, along with attacks on social and living conditions and moves toward dictatorial forms of rule. The ruling parties and the so-called opposition will use the elections to divert attention of people from these crucial issues.

The SEP will issue an election statement in the coming days explaining the crisis of the Sri Lankan ruling elite and outlining the party's alternative program, based on international socialism. As the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, has a record of fighting for the political independence of the working class from every faction of the bourgeoisie and to mobilise workers, leading the rural poor, for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

We are planning to hold meetings, workplace campaigns and lectures, not only where the SEP is contesting but also in other areas, to explain this program. The SEP has launched a one million-rupee election and party building fund. We urge workers and youth to support this campaign.



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