

Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka to contest the November presidential election

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
5 October 2019

The Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, will contest the country's presidential election scheduled to be held on November 16. Our candidate is Pani Wijesiriwardena, a long-time senior member of the party and a member of the Colombo editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The SEP is the only party in Sri Lanka that bases itself on socialist internationalism and fights for the independent political mobilisation of the working class against capitalist rule.

The Sri Lankan ruling class is mired in a deep political crisis, the product of a systemic breakdown of world capitalism, rising geopolitical rivalry between the major powers—with the US at the centre—and the danger of a third world war.

Sri Lanka is enmeshed in Washington's reckless militarist drive against China. Over the past four years, the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe has ever more closely integrated Sri Lanka's armed forces with the US military.

The US wants a Status of Forces Agreement with Colombo that gives its military free access to the country and the establishment of major military bases on the island nation. India, the regional rival of China and Pakistan, is now a strategic partner of the US and has already signed major basing agreements with Washington.

The Sri Lankan presidential election has been called amid the eruption of wage strikes by university non-academic staff, railway workers, public school teachers and government administrative officers. These struggles are part of the mounting opposition of workers, students and the poor against the International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures.

Together with its sister parties of the ICFI, the SEP is fighting to build a unified movement of the international working class against the capitalist profit system and the danger of war on the basis of the program of world socialist revolution.

President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in January 2015 in a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington with the backing of India and supported by United National Party (UNP) leader Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The US and other major powers had supported Rajapakse's anti-democratic methods and the communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but opposed his close economic relations with Beijing. Washington wanted Sri Lanka brought into alignment with its "pivot to Asia" policy against China, a policy supported by all the establishment parties, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the Muslim parties and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

While the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government shifted Sri Lanka's foreign policy in favour of Washington and New Delhi, the cash-strapped administration faces a mounting debt crisis. Unable to overcome any of the social problems it promised to resolve, it has ruthlessly imposed the harsh cuts in social spending demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

These austerity measures have provoked widespread social opposition and led to major losses for the UNP and Sirisena's faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the February 2018 local government elections. Former President Rajapakse's newly organised Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) won control of most councils.

Factional warfare erupted within the political elite after the elections, as political rivals battled over how best to crush the rising working-class opposition. Last October Sirisena suddenly ousted Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replaced him with Mahinda Rajapakse in an attempt to form a "strong government."

Sirisena's coup failed, however, because Washington opposed Rajapakse's return and the country's Supreme Courts ruled that the president's dissolution of parliament was illegal.

Notwithstanding their factional differences, all sections of the ruling elite seized on the April 21 bomb attacks by

Islamic terrorists and used them to justify the imposition of police-state measures against workers and poor. Evidence demonstrates that the Sri Lankan defence authorities, as well as Sirisena, Wickremesinghe and Rajapakse, were warned in advance of the terror attacks but allowed them to happen.

Sirisena, with the backing of all the parliamentary parties, deployed the military, arming it with draconian emergency powers, and then whipped up an anti-Muslim campaign to derail and disorient the population.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, the UNP, SLPP and JVP all insisted that the priority was to defend “national security” by strengthening the military and intelligence apparatus. In the presidential election, each party is attempting to outbid its rivals over who will impose the harshest laws. The response of the ruling elites to the resurgence of class struggles in every country is to prepare dictatorship and fascist forms of rule.

Politically discredited, Sirisena will not contest the presidential elections—his parliamentary faction of the SLFP has fallen from 65 to 15 MPs with some deserting to the SLPP. But he continues to do everything possible to strengthen the military.

After a drawn-out internal battle, the pro-market UNP selected the party’s deputy leader, Sajith Premadasa as its presidential candidate. It hopes that Premadasa’s connections with sections of the Buddhist hierarchy will attract Sinhala-Buddhist votes.

The SLPP’s presidential candidate is the former defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the brother of Mahinda Rajapakse. Notorious for his brutal conduct of the war against the LTTE, he is accused of committing war crimes during the last years of the conflict and in the bloody suppression of strikes and protests by workers and the poor in the south.

Gamini Viyangoda and Chandraguptha Thenuwara, who supported the regime-change operation against former President Rajapakse, are currently taking legal action to prevent Gotabhaya Rajapakse running for president. They argue that the former defence secretary, who obtained US citizenship after leaving the military, had failed to renounce his US citizenship as required under Sri Lanka’s reactionary election laws.

The legal action came into prominence following concerns expressed in the Western media about the possibility of Gotabhaya becoming president. The London-based *Economist Intelligence Unit*, for example, has warned that “relations with the West and India would suffer” and engagements with China increase if he came to power.

The JVP-dominated National People’s Power (NPP) has selected JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake as its candidate. A number of university academics and

professionals, who flocked to Sirisena in 2015, were involved in lobbying for the NPP to back Disanayake. It is the first time since 1999 that the JVP has contested a presidential election, having backed UNP and SLFP candidates over the past two decades and serving in Kumaratunga’s government in 2004.

Pseudo-left parties, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), are preparing, once again, to play a cynical role in the presidential election. The FSP and USP claim they have fielded “socialist” candidates, but these parties, along with the NSSP, backed Sirisena in 2015. The NSSP, after having slavishly supported the Wickremesinghe-led government, is fielding a candidate whose political task will be to campaign for the UNP.

The SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, have an unblemished record of fighting for socialist internationalism. It is the only party in Sri Lanka that consistently opposed the civil war, demanding withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the north and east, and for the unity of workers across ethnic lines. It fights for a workers’ and peasants’ government in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

SEP candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena is a retired teacher and a steadfast fighter for this perspective and in defence of all democratic rights. His consistent struggle against the trade union apparatus and its betrayals over many decades, and in the face of victimisation by the UNP government during the 1980s, has won him wide support from students and teachers, workers and the poor. Wijesiriwardena was the SEP’s presidential candidate in the 2015 election.

The SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), will be issuing a detailed election manifesto and outlining a program of public meetings throughout the country to explain our policies. We urge all workers, youth and progressive-minded intellectuals to support and participate in this campaign.

The SEP has launched a one million-rupee (about \$US5,500) election fund and calls for generous support. Our fight is to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership of the working class, which means building the SEP as a mass revolutionary party. We urge all those who agree with our program and perspective to join the SEP and take forward this political struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact