

Sri Lankan SEP presidential candidate holds press conference

Our correspondents
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Pani Wijesiriwardena, the Socialist Equality Party candidate in Sri Lanka's November 16 presidential election, held a press conference in Colombo's National Library building on October 10.

Reporters attended from the government-owned television channels Rupavahini and Vasantham TV and the privately-owned Swarnavahini, Dan TV, Sirasa, Ada Derana and IBC networks. Print media outlets, such as the English-language *Daily Mirror* and leading Tamil dailies *Thinakaran*, and *Virakesari*, also sent journalists. Most filed reports.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias opened the event by pointing out that the 35 candidates contesting the election was the largest number in the history of the presidential elections. He said that some commentators have claimed that the large candidate list was in response to the "democratic climate" created by the so-called *yahapalana* [good governance] of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Dias rejected this claim, saying the large number of candidates represented widespread popular disaffection with the major establishment parties. The breakdown in bourgeois politics, he added, was in response to the intensifying political and economic catastrophe facing the Sri Lankan government.

Candidates from the ruling United National Party, the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and their henchmen, have no means for resolving this crisis, Dias said. The majority of candidates do not even use the word 'crisis.'

Dias said that the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its forerunner the Revolutionary Communist League, is not just warning about the horrible

consequences facing the working class, rural poor, minorities and the youth but is presenting an international socialist program as the only solution.

"This is the basic purpose of the SEP's decision to contest this election," he added, and the reason it has stood in every presidential election since it was registered as a political party in 2000.

Addressing the press conference, Pani Wijesiriwardena said the SEP's politics were not constricted to national boundaries. "This election is being held in the midst of a growing political and economic crisis of the government and the ruling class as a whole.

"Internationally, there is a severe economic debacle and acute geopolitical tensions between imperialist powers themselves and between the US and China and Russia. All over the world, governments are imposing the full burden of global economic crisis on the working class and the oppressed masses. In every country, terrible economic austerity measures are being implemented."

Explaining how those global tendencies were expressed in Sri Lanka, Wijesiriwardena said: "The treasury secretary has ordered the state institutions to cut their expenditures by another 10 percent. This comes on the top an earlier order to cut costs by 15 percent."

The SEP presidential candidate pointed to the rising wave of strike action by workers internationally against such austerity measures, and also referred to escalating geopolitical tensions and the danger of a third world war.

"The SEP presents its socialist solution to this crisis, i.e., an international socialist program. In plain language, we emphasise the need to fight for a Union of Socialist Republics internationally. And in Sri Lanka,

we propose the establishment of a Sri Lanka-Eelam United Socialist Republic in the form of a workers' and peasants' government."

Outlining the SEP's socialist program, he said: "We advocate the nationalisation of large plantations, corporations, banks and insurance companies under the democratic control of the working class. Under capitalism, production is conducted for private profit. The SEP fights for the seizure of political power by the working class and production organised for human needs, not private profit. This is the only way to defend the basic rights of the working class and oppressed masses, for decent education and healthcare, and for the rights of the oppressed masses and minorities."

Journalists asked Wijesiriwardena whether the SEP's call for the nationalisation of corporations was viable, how many members the party had and whether the party had considered alliances with other "socialist" parties and the JVP. One reporter asked whether the SEP work was relevant for the masses, given that some political analysts claim that today there was neither socialism nor capitalism but a system in between.

Dias explained that by running a candidate in the election the SEP was providing a voice to the working class, rural poor, the minorities and youth "The SEP has a membership dedicated to its work in the region of South Asia. However, the party is not satisfied with its existing number of members and always seeks to expand its works and to become a mass party. Its organ is the *World Socialist Web Site*, which is updated daily and published in more than 20 languages.

"The SEP firmly believes that its work is relevant because capitalist society is facing an unprecedented historic crisis. This crisis is an objective fact and it poses the necessity of the alternative socialist program advocated by the SEP."

Referring to the question about the JVP, Dias said: "The JVP is not a socialist party. The SEP fights to win the working class and the oppressed masses to a socialist program and is not interested in making fronts and discussing with the enemies of socialism. Socialism cannot be implemented by aligning with this organisation.

"Throughout its history, the JVP has served capitalism and has been in alliances with capitalist parties. Now it is dedicated to preserving capitalism against socialism. It knows that the only genuine

socialist party is the SEP and that's why it is able to hold talks with pseudo-socialist liars but not with SEP. It is a certificate that the SEP is in correct path."

On the question of nationalising industry, Dias said: "The SEP advocates for nationalisation under workers' control. Other so-called nationalisations, such as those carried out by Sirima Bandaranaike [government during 1970–77], were not socialist measures but were implemented by the capitalist state, which took responsibility for maintenance of these industries. It had nothing to do with socialism..."

"To implement a socialist program, workers should have organs to exercise their political power. In the former Soviet Union, in its early days, it had Soviets—workers' councils—in which workers democratically discussed the program and achieve decisions accordingly."

Dias said that when SLPP candidate Gotabhaya Rajapakse promised to provide flour free-of-charge for the peasants if he was elected, no one asked whether this was practicable. He warned that irrespective of the promises now being made by Rajapakse and other candidates, austerity measures would be imposed on workers, small farmers and the poor, whoever won.

"We have seen the big parties winning with two-thirds or even five-sixths majority but the problems facing ordinary people remain. The program of the capitalist parties will undoubtedly propel workers and the oppressed masses into social struggles like those underway in Ecuador now. The SEP fights to mobilise these struggling masses in a common struggle against capitalism."



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