

Vote for SEP candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena in the Sri Lankan presidential election

Build a socialist movement against imperialist war, austerity and dictatorship

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), calls on workers, youth, the rural poor and intellectuals to support its presidential candidate, Pani Wijesiriwardena, in the November 16 presidential election.

Wijesiriwardena is the only socialist candidate contesting the election. He is a member of the SEP's Political Committee and serves on the Colombo editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site*. He has a 40-year record of fighting for the social and democratic rights of workers, youth and the rural poor, on the basis of socialist internationalism.

The SEP is advancing a socialist program in opposition to all the bourgeois parties, including the United National Party (UNP), Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), as well as their pseudo-left hangers-on—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), United Socialist Party (USP) and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

The SEP is the only party telling the truth to workers and youth. There is no solution to the immense dangers facing workers in Sri Lanka and internationally—war, austerity and the threat of dictatorship and fascism—within the framework of capitalism and its outmoded nation state system.

The only solution lies in the abolition of the crisis-ridden profit system, by unifying workers throughout South Asia and around the world to refashion society to meet the pressing needs of the vast majority of humanity, not the profits of the ultra-rich few.

Our perspective is meeting up with a resurgence of the working class around the world. Strikes by teachers in the US have been followed by an ongoing strike of 48,000 General Motors workers, winning support from their colleagues in GM plants in Mexico, Canada and South Korea.

France is being rocked by the “Yellow Vest” movement of workers and youth against the Macron government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights. In Hong Kong, mass protests demanding basic democratic rights, involving millions, have continued for months.

In India, a huge two-day general stoppage of 180 million workers in January forms part of a broader strike movement. Tens of thousands of teachers in Tamil Nadu stopped work in the same month, while workers at Maruti Suzuki and Motherson Motors have come into struggle against attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions.

The working class in Sri Lanka is part of this global movement. Since last year, different sections of workers have taken action against the government's austerity program. Last December, tens of thousands of plantation workers stopped work to fight for decent wages, despite opposition from the trade unions. Over the past two months alone, struggles have erupted involving hundreds of thousands of teachers, an

indefinite strike of non-academic workers, along with railway workers and other employees, all of which were betrayed by the unions.

The central focus of the SEP's presidential campaign is to build the necessary revolutionary leadership of the working class, in collaboration with our sister parties of the ICFI, for the struggles ahead in Sri Lanka, South Asia and globally.

Halt the drive to war!

The ruling classes around the world have no solution to the worsening financial crisis and economic slump other than to resort to trade war and war against their rivals, and to class war, to impose new burdens on the working class.

The chief destabilizing factor in world politics today is US imperialism which, under President Trump, has become more aggressive and more reckless as it desperately seeks to shore up its waning global hegemony.

Trump has ramped up the US confrontation with China, begun under President Obama, into an economic war that, as in the 1930s, threatens to plunge Asia and the world into full-scale world war, this time involving nuclear powers. He is also targeting any other country, including his so-called European allies, that threatens US economic and strategic interests.

In preparation for war, Washington is strengthening its alliances, strategic partnerships and basing arrangements throughout the region. The Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Strategy 2019 stated: “Within South Asia, we are working to operationalise our Major Defense Partnership with India, while pursuing emerging partnerships with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bangladesh, and Nepal.”

The far right, Hindu government in India is building on the “global Indo-US strategic partnership” forged under the previous Congress Party-led government. New Delhi has signed agreements over the past year to throw open India's ports and military bases to the US military.

Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena, who came to power in a US-orchestrated regime change operation in 2015 with the support of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, rapidly shifted foreign policy in favour of the US and India. Colombo has integrated the country's armed forces closely with the US military, and has renewed an access and cross service agreement with Washington signed by the previous administration of Mahinda Rajapakse.

The working class in Sri Lanka cannot allow the country to be drawn into the maelstrom of geo-political tensions and rivalries that can only end in the barbarism of nuclear war. The only way to halt the drive to war is through the building of a unified anti-war movement of the international working class to overthrow capitalism and its outmoded system of rival nation states, which is the root cause of conflict. We call on workers and youth to join with the SEP and ICFI in fighting to build such a movement.

Oppose fascism and dictatorship!

The response of the ruling class internationally to the re-emergence of the class struggle has been a sharp turn to the far right, fascism and dictatorship. In the US, Trump's contempt for democratic rights and constitutional norms, his America First patriotism, and his vicious anti-immigrant xenophobia and racism, are increasingly raising the danger of fascism in America.

In Europe, the ruling elites are turning to far right and fascist parties to implement police state measures against the working class. The fascist Alternative for Germany has been deliberately elevated to prominence as the main opposition party, while neo-Nazi groups carry out terrorist attacks against immigrants and others. While these far-right parties lack mass support, they represent a real threat to the working class.

In India, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has flouted the constitution and abrogated the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. The lockdown of the state since August 5, with the deployment of large numbers of troops and the severing of communication with the outside world, is a warning of the preparations being made against the working class as a whole.

Sri Lanka is no exception. Sirisena and Wickremesinghe came to power in 2015 on the basis of a fraudulent campaign, backed by the pseudo-left groups, trade unions and NGOs, promising to end corruption, lift living standards, restore democratic rights and provide "good governance."

The government has carried out the opposite, implementing the IMF's austerity agenda, using the police and military to suppress the struggles of workers, youth and the rural poor, and to prepare dictatorial forms of rule.

Facing mounting popular opposition, President Sirisena split from the "unity government" with Wickremesinghe and unconstitutionally installed Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister last October. The political coup failed because the US considered Rajapakse as pro-Beijing, and the Supreme Court overturned his dissolution of parliament. As the SEP explained, the coup was a warning to workers of the police state measures that would be used against them.

In April, the government seized on the terrorist bomb attacks by Islamists militants to declare a state of emergency and impose draconian anti-democratic measures. The whole political establishment backed Sirisena's massive deployment of the military and use of emergency powers, including the ruling United National Party (UNP), the opposition Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), along with various Tamil and Muslim parties and trade unions.

The utter cynicism of them all was underscored by the fact that senior government and opposition leaders, as well as defence officials, knew of the impending attack and did nothing. They allowed the slaughter of hundreds of innocent people so as to exploit the tragedy for their own reactionary political purposes. The real target of the police state measures, accompanied by a xenophobic anti-Muslim campaign, was not terrorism but the working class.

A line-up of anti-working class candidates

All the establishment parties are campaigning in the presidential election for a "strong government"—a synonym for autocratic rule.

The SLPP is standing former defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the brother of ex-president Mahinda Rajapakse. Both were centrally responsible for the war crimes and atrocities carried out by the military in the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). According to the UN, 40,000 civilians were killed in the final months alone.

The SLPP, a breakaway from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), is standing the former defence secretary to give a militaristic image to its campaign and rally Sinhala chauvinist forces such as Bodu Bala Sena and Sihala Ravaya. He declared, at his first election rally, that he would release all military personnel jailed on war-related charges and further strengthen the military and intelligence apparatus.

The UNP candidate Sajith Premadasa has matched the SLPP by announcing that he will appoint former army commander Sarath Fonseka as defence minister and "use his experience to crush any sort of terrorism." Fonseka led the military in the final years of the war and is directly responsible, along with the Rajapakse brothers, for war crimes.

Sajith Premadasa is making promises to the Buddhist establishment in a bid to mobilise Sinhala extremists. He is following in the footsteps of his father, former President R. Premadasa, who unleashed military-linked death squads to establish a reign of terror that crushed rural unrest in 1988-1990, slaughtering 60,000 youth.

The JVP is contesting the presidential election for the first time in 20 years, and supporting the major parties—the UNP and SLFP. Academics and NGOs that backed the bogus "good governance" campaign in 2015 are now trying to dress up the JVP as a progressive alternative, so as to divert mounting popular hostility to capitalism into safe parliamentary channels.

The JVP's candidate Anura Kumara Dissanayake is trying to hoodwink voters with a re-run of the 2015 campaign against corruption, but is also calling for the rule of "law and discipline"—watch words for autocratic rule. Workers and youth should recall the JVP's record. As part of the coalition government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 2004, the JVP assisted in implementing the IMF's pro-market agenda. It is now trying to woo Tamils and Muslims by calling for national unity, after being in the forefront of the chauvinist anti-Tamil war and supporting the occupation of the North and East.

The Muslim Congress, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and various splinter groups are campaigning on communal politics that only divide the working class. They all backed the 2015 regime-change operation, thus demonstrating their support for US imperialism. The TNA's perspective is to seek Washington's backing for a devolution package, to secure the privileges of the Tamil elites and their "right" to exploit Tamil workers.

An agenda of austerity and class war

No one should be duped by Sajith Premadasa's promises about a prosperous future for everyone or Gotabhaya Rajapakse's pledges to provide free flour and fertilizer for farmers. Whoever is elected, the next president will make further deep inroads into the living conditions of workers and the poor.

Amid the deepening global economic crisis, the Sri Lankan capitalist class is facing a massive debt and needs \$US15 billion to service it up to 2021. International rating agency Moody's recently warned that Sri Lanka was on the brink of default. Economic growth has declined to just 2.7 percent this year.

The IMF is demanding that the budget deficit be reduced to 3.5 percent of GDP in 2020, down from 5.3 percent last year. To implement these cuts, the IMF is insisting on the privatization of state-owned enterprises, the slashing of price subsidies, increased charges for electricity and water and broader taxes on working people. To impose these measures requires dictatorial forms of rule to suppress the inevitable eruption of opposition.

The working class must develop its own strategy to oppose these counterrevolutionary preparations: the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, with the support of the rural poor, to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for world socialism.

The SEP is advancing the following socialist program in the forthcoming election:

For the international unity of the working class

The resurgence of international class struggle demonstrates the objective unity of the working class. Globally-organised transnational corporations pit worker against worker in a never-ending downward spiral. The working class can only defend its rights by fighting to reorganize the global economy on a socialist basis—that is, to meet pressing social needs, not corporate profit.

To unify the working class, the SEP calls on workers to oppose all forms

of racism and nationalism. Ever since formal independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan ruling class has whipped up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism to divide working people and prop up its rule. Communal politics, which led to the three-decade civil war, has resulted in a disaster for Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims alike.

For social equality

Globally, capitalism has produced unprecedented levels of social inequality where, according to Oxfam, 26 billionaires have amassed more wealth than 3.8 billion people—that is, half the world's population. In Sri Lanka, even according to the government's manipulated statistics, the richest 20 percent obtains 51 percent of total household income, while the poorest 20 percent receives just 5 percent.

Workers are facing a continuous deterioration in their living and working conditions. During 2017 and 2018, the real wages of public sector workers declined by 7.2 percent and 2 percent respectively, while the wages in the private sector fell by 5.9 and 3.5 percent. Unemployment and underemployment is on the rise with a mushrooming of temporary and contract jobs, along with labor hire agencies.

The rural population exists largely on subsistence farming. Peasants have become victims of the agro-companies, which set the prices for pesticides, fertilizer and produce. They live in debt their whole lives and, when the debt burden becomes unbearable, commit suicide. Following the IMF's directive, successive governments have slashed fertilizer subsidies.

The SEP proposes to expropriate big business and carry out a sweeping redistribution of wealth, from the rich to the poor, to fund the following policies:

- * An expansion of jobs for the unemployed through the reduction of the working week to 30 hours, without any loss of pay. A massive public works program to build public housing, schools, hospitals and roads to create employment.

- * All workers must have the basic social right to secure, well-paid jobs, with a living wage indexed to inflation. Abolish the oppressive contract labour system.

- * Expand public education and health care to provide free, high-quality services for all. Organise public housing to provide decent, affordable accommodation.

- * Allocate state land to all landless farmers and cancel the debts of all poor farmers and fishermen. Make cheap credit, technical advice and other assistance available. Ensure prices for produce that guarantee a decent standard of living.

Defend democratic rights

Democratic rights are under attack in every country. This is most acutely expressed in the vendetta against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange for telling the truth to the world about the crimes of US imperialism. The US, the UK and Australian governments have conspired to imprison him in Britain, where he faces extradition to the US and up to 175 years in jail. The SEP urges workers to fight for the freedom of Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning, who has been imprisoned for refusing to give evidence against Assange.

Successive governments in Sri Lanka have a long record of imposing emergency rule and violating basic democratic rights. The current government is continuing the military occupation of the North and East and the abuse of the rights of the Tamil population. The Easter Sunday bombing of churches and hotels has become the pretext for the reactivation of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act and scores of arrests. The government routinely uses the Essential Services Regulations to illegalize strikes and protests.

The detention of award-winning writer, Shakthika Sathkumara, for four months from April 1, on the basis of a bogus complaint by Buddhist clergy, is another demonstration that there is no constituency in the ruling class for the defence of democratic rights. The fight to defend democratic rights is completely bound up with the defence of basic social rights and

the struggle against capitalism, on the basis of a socialist perspective.

Abolish the country's anti-democratic, communal constitution and its repressive laws. Defend the democratic rights of Tamils and Muslims. Draw up a new constitution through a democratically-elected constituent assembly. Only the working class can take the initiative and lead a genuine struggle for the establishment of democratic rights, by rallying the support of the rural poor and oppressed.

Fight for the political independence of the working class

None of the democratic and social rights of working people can be won by making futile appeals to capitalist governments and parties. The working class must establish its political independence from all factions of the ruling elite and in particular, the pseudo-left parties such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), which form the last line of defence for the bankrupt profit system.

The NSSP, after years of supporting the UNP, directly helped in the 2015 regime change and has abjectly attempted to provide the big business government a "left" face. It has branded the struggles of workers as right-wing conspiracies and justified the government's austerity program as the means for "economic development." The main task of the NSSP presidential candidate is to campaign for the UNP!

The USP, until recently, was also part of the front with the NSSP to support the UNP. In the 2015 presidential election, the USP, along with the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), very vocally called for the defence of democratic rights against the "Rajapakse dictatorship," but remained completely silent about the fact that Sirisena, only months before, had been a senior minister in the same dictatorship.

Amid mounting strikes and protests, the USP and FSP are working overtime to convince workers and youth that the government will bow to pressure and that the trade unions will fight for their rights.

In reality, most unions are directly controlled by the establishment parties and "left" groups, and are deeply hostile to any action by workers. When compelled to call strikes, the unions deliberately isolate their members, limit any actions, and ultimately shut down the campaigns on the basis of false promises by government ministers and corporate officials.

Workers have to begin to take matters into their own hands and break out of the straitjacket of the unions. The SEP calls for the establishment of independent action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods, democratically elected by the workers themselves. They must reach out to workers in other industries in Sri Lanka and internationally, and seek to mobilise the youth and rural poor.

The SEP vigorously campaigns for the building of action committees. When more than 100,000 plantation workers stopped work last December, workers at the Abbotsleigh estate heeded the SEP's call. Their action committee should act as an example to the working class everywhere.

Such action committees can form the basis for the independent political mobilization of the working class at the head of the rural masses, for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government that will implement socialist policies.

The SEP calls for the formation of a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic, as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally. Such a government would nationalise large foreign and local companies, and large estates and banks, under workers' control, repudiate foreign loans and reorganise production and distribution along socialist lines.

Build the SEP as a mass revolutionary party

As the resurgence of the class struggle demonstrates, revolutionary struggles are on the agenda. However, the strategic experiences of the working class during the past century underscore one basic political fact: without a revolutionary party built in advance, based on the science of Marxism and steeled in struggle, the revolutionary seizure of power is impossible.

There is only one political organization on the face of the planet that is capable of carrying out such a task—the International Committee of the Fourth International, which represents the continuity of the political struggle waged by Leon Trotsky against Stalinism.

The SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, was formed 51 years ago as the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), based on the ICFI's struggle against the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). The LSSP betrayed the principles of socialist internationalism by joining the capitalist government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1964.

The SEP's perspective is rooted in Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated that in countries of a belated capitalist development, such as Sri Lanka, the capitalist class is incapable of carrying out basic democratic tasks. Those tasks fall to the working class, in the struggle for socialism.

The SEP has a long and proud record of exposing imperialist intrigues, opposing the communal war against the Tamil population and calling for the unconditional withdrawal of the military from the North and East. It has defended the rural masses from state terror, and fought indefatigably for the political independence of the working class on a socialist program. Its youth movement is the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

In 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was accompanied by an orgy of triumphalism, by the capitalist classes internationally, over the victory of the capitalist market and the end of socialism. The ICFI was alone in establishing that it was not socialism that failed, but Stalinism. Nearly three decades later, the promise of a new period of peace and prosperity has proven to be a chimera. As capitalism lurches from one crisis to the next, the class struggle is erupting again and a new generation is turning to socialism for solutions.

We urge workers, youth and intellectuals in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally to support our election campaign in every way possible. If you are eligible, vote for our candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena, participate in our campaign and donate to our election fund. Above all, study the Socialist Equality Party's program and history, and that of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and apply to join and build our party as the revolutionary leadership of the working class for the revolutionary struggles ahead.



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