

Sri Lankan SEP holds inaugural presidential election meeting

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held their inaugural presidential election meeting on October 15 at Colombo's Public Library auditorium. The SEP is running Pani Wijesiriwardena, a longstanding member of the SEP Political Committee and the WSWS Colombo Editorial Board, as its candidate for the Sri Lankan presidential election to be held on November 16. About 100 workers, youth, professionals and housewives, including party members and supporters, attended the meeting.

SEP/IYSSE members campaigned in the working-class areas in and around Colombo for the meeting. Thousands of copies of the WSWS article "SEP in Sri Lanka to contest the November Presidential Election" in Sinhala and Tamil were distributed among the workers, the poor and youth.

Chairing the meeting, SEP Political Committee member Vilani Peiris explained that the SEP was the only party presenting an international socialist program for the working class and the poor. All the other parties, including the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), were advocating reactionary nationalist policies.

Peiris warned that whichever capitalist candidate won the election, the conditions facing the working people would worsen. She pointed out that like Gotabhaya Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and Sajith Premadasa of the ruling United National Front (UNF), Anura Kumara Disanayake of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) advocated a thoroughly bourgeois program. Peiris referred to a JVP health policy document which stated that any future government led by the JVP would maintain private hospitals.

Pradeep Ramanayake, an IYSSE leader, outlined the situation facing students and youth under the growing crisis of moribund capitalism. He said that for the 2nd quarter of 2019, unemployment among youth in Sri Lanka was as high as 20 percent. The conditions facing students were also deteriorating as a result of cuts by successive governments to education expenses.

Delivering the main report, Wijesiriwardena reviewed the main features of the economic and political crisis of the ruling elite: a systemic breakdown of the capitalist system

internationally, the drive toward a world war as inter-imperialist rivalries escalate, and a worldwide wave of class struggles after three decades of their suppression by social democratic, Stalinist and Pabloite parties and trade unions. He referred to recent strikes by university non-academic, railway and other workers and teachers in Sri Lanka.

Wijesiriwardena elaborated on the economic crisis faced by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. "The ruling class in Sri Lanka needs \$US15 billion for debt servicing till 2021. The international rating agency, Moody's, recently warned that Sri Lanka was on the brink of defaulting on debt repayments. Even though interest rates are being continuously cut, the economy is stagnating. The IMF predicts that economic growth will be just 2.7 percent for the coming year.

"The IMF also has dictated a cut in the budget deficit to 3.5 percent of GDP by 2020. In line with that, the current Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, in two recent circulars, has ordered government departments and institutions to cut expenditure by 25 percent." Under those conditions, all the promises made by rival candidates about providing this or that benefit for workers and farmers would prove to be just damn lies.

The SEP candidate explained how global geo-political rivalries, particularly the US war drive against China, has brought humanity face-to-face with the danger of a nuclear conflagration, threatening the lives of the world's population. As the SEP had warned in the 2015 presidential election, the regime-change in Sri Lanka sponsored by US imperialism with the help of its regional ally India, had led the country to ever more closely integrate into the US military-strategic offensive against China.

Wijesiriwardena said the war plans and attacks on the social position of the working class would propel workers into struggles, breaking from the straitjacket of the trade unions. "We have seen that in the last year's struggle of estate workers for higher pay," he said. He referred to the formation of an action committee, independent of the unions, by Abbotsleigh tea estate workers under the SEP's political guidance.

The three "main candidates," Premadasa, Rajapakse and Disanayake, had taken "national security" as their main campaign theme. "Given the acute economic crisis in Sri Lanka

as part of global economic slowdown,” Wijesiriwardena said, “this means crushing the growing wave of class struggles and protests by workers and the oppressed masses.”

The SEP candidate added: “For his part, Premadasa has declared that the defence portfolio will be assigned to Sarath Fonseka, the army commander who ruthlessly prosecuted the racist war during which tens of thousands of Tamils were killed and hundreds of thousands were displaced. By ‘national security,’ the capitalist candidates mean the security of bourgeois rule against the challenge to it coming from the working class.”

Wijesiriwardena concluded: “All these problems emerge from the organic incapability of the national bourgeoisie in the countries like Sri Lanka to meet the needs of the masses. The SEP says that no iota of faith should be placed in other candidates. In the current election campaign, we advocate a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia.”

Wijesiriwardena invited those listening to the meeting to study the SEP’s program, vote for it and join the party.

Delivering the final speech, SEP general secretary Wije Dias said: “This election, for the ruling class here as well as for their imperialist masters, is not just an event scheduled in the constitution. If the working class, rural poor and the youth take this presidential election as another voting exercise they will find themselves totally politically disarmed before the brutal austerity measures to be imposed and the democratic rights that are to be destroyed by whoever becomes the next president.”

Already the reactionary strategic agenda of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government had been challenged by a wave of workers’ strikes, struggles and protests by small farmers and students.

The government had allowed April’s bomb explosions by Islamic fundamentalists to take place, despite clear warnings by international intelligence agencies in advance, because it intended to use the panic and communal confusion created by the terrorist attacks to disorient workers and the oppressed and urge them to abandon their struggles in the name of national defence. This tactic failed, however. By September, the class struggles surged forward once again, as part of the international upsurge of workers against the ruling classes.

Dias pointed to recent political developments. Suddenly arrests have been made, with the authorities claiming that new Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suspects and arms caches had been found in the island’s North and East. Alleged LTTE cadres had been taken into custody in Malaysia too. These sinister claims were made by the same people who had claimed the total military eradication of LTTE “terrorism” in 2009.

“The present election is being used by all the main capitalist parties to rally communal forces and sections of the armed forces to crush the democratic rights of the people and set the stage for a wholesale rollback of hard-won social rights.”

Dias said: “As Leon Trotsky insisted, the international working class must make its own strategic preparations in opposition to the reactionary strategy of imperialism. We adhere to this all important guideline.”

Dias explained that the large number of candidates in this election was not due to any democratic environment. Rather, the ruling class needed many more stooges than before to defend the moribund capitalist system. The best example of this fraud was the Pabloite NSSP led by Wickremabahu Karunaratne. He had gone to the level of openly violating election laws by using the free media opportunities provided to his party to express support for the United National Front candidate Premadasa.

All pseudo-left candidates, from the NSSP, USP and FSP, parroted “nationalist solutions” to the burning needs of the workers, rural poor and youth. Their utterings were in no way dissimilar from the lies and promises poured out by the bourgeois candidates. They tried to convince voters that there existed no alternative to this capitalist national framework. This standpoint invariably led them to accept the imperialist world order and toe the economic and political strategy of the major powers led by the US, against the future of world humanity.

The program the SEP offered to the people during this election was based on the same international socialist perspective that the party advocated to the workers, small farmers and youth engaged in struggle against the capitalist system. This raised the unpostponable necessity to build the world party of socialist revolution.

“Such a shift of the political power into the hands of the working class, supported by the oppressed masses, will transform the capitalist economic order into a socialist one, ending production and distribution for capitalist profit in order to fulfil the economic and cultural needs of humanity,” Dias said in conclusion.



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