

Sri Lanka: SEP presidential candidate addresses meetings in war-ravaged north

Our reporters
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Pani Wijesiriwardena, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for the Sri Lankan presidential election on November 16, addressed two meetings held in the war-affected Northern Province. The first meeting was held on October 18, at Weerasingham Hall in Jaffna. The second was held the following day at Oori Anderson Hall in Karainagar. Both meetings were well-attended by workers, fishermen, youth and housewives.

The SEP candidate also participated in a press conference which was widely covered by reporters of the Jaffna-based electronic and print media. These included TV channels such as Shakthi, Samugam, Capital, Vasantham, Derana, Dan, UTV, Hiru, Surian FM, Aathavan, Theepam, Suwarnavahini and the Jaffna-based newspapers, *Uthayan* and *Thinakkural*.

Uthayan published an article titled “Capitalist parties are seeking to establish police state rule” based on Wijesiriwardena’s remarks, while the half-page article in *Thinakkural* was headlined “Candidates’ propaganda about ‘LTTE is reviving’ aimed at imposing military rule on the northern people.” The same newspaper published an interview with Wijesiriwardena entitled “I am standing for oppressed people.”

Members of the SEP and its youth movement, International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) vigorously campaigned among the students of the Jaffna University, workers at the Jaffna Teaching Hospital, the main post office, and among residents of Gurunagar and Karainagar prior to the meetings.

Almost every person met during the campaigns expressed their anger over the devastation caused by successive Colombo governments during the nearly three decades’ long war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE was defeated in May 2009 amid savage military offensives that killed tens of thousands during the final months of the war.

Majority of the people are struggling to get their lives back together. Though Colombo governments have hypocritically declared “democracy” has been established, the province remains under de facto military administration occupied by

hundreds of thousands of troops.

People were also angry with the Tamil bourgeois parties. Pradeepan, a resident of Jaffna town, said: “The TNA [Tamil National Alliance] promised us that if [Maithripala] Sirisena became president, he would establish democratic rights of the Tamil people. But nothing has happened.” He was referring to the 2015 presidential election in which the TNA vigorously campaigned for Sirisena so as to bring a pro-US government to power in Colombo.

Explaining his life as a war refugee, Pradeepan said: “We fled to Vanni to save our lives and underwent enormous hardships. The Colombo rulers who destroyed our lives do not take the responsibility for rebuilding them. Why we should vote them?” Pradeepan is still living with his family in a makeshift hut as fire destroyed his house.

He spoke about the pressing issues facing youth, including police-military repression and unemployment. “With their difficult living conditions many young people cannot complete their basic education. They have to opt out of the education to earn a living.”

Swaminathan, a retired medical doctor in Jaffna, recounted the history of the Trotskyist movement and recalled how the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) fought for the unity of workers in the North and South. Those days they fought for socialism but they abandoned it, he said.

The campaigners pointed out that the LSSP betrayal in 1964 in joining the capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party government paved the way for strengthening anti-Tamil communalism that led to war.

V. Renukan, a university student, told IYSSE members: “I have learned something about socialism in school and the university that it calls for equality. In speaking with you, I got a scientific idea of the Russian Revolution and socialism. I am much interested in reading the *World Socialist Web Site*. Many people in the north are very poor.”

C. Koneswari, 57, a resident of Oori, said: “In elections, every politician wants to grab our votes to come to power. They don’t care about our lives.” She explained that even the basic needs of people had been neglected by the

governments and local authorities. The road to our village is dilapidated with pot holes. Buses run only during school hours. At other times you have to walk three kilometres to get to the main road. Drinking water is a big problem. You can get only 2 litres a day from the regional local council. If you want more then you have to pay for that, she explained.

Thirugnana Sampanthar, an SEP Central Committee member, chaired the meeting held at Weerasingham Hall in Jaffna. Introducing Wijesiriwardena, he explained that SEP was contesting the election as the world was witnessing a revival of international class struggle. “The ruling class of Sri Lanka has resorted to whipping up racism in such circumstances to divide the working class.”

Sampanthar said that Tamil nationalism must be rejected as it only divides Tamil workers from their Sinhala and Muslim class brothers and sisters. Other oppressed layers of society including ethnic minorities, fishermen and farmers must turn to the working class in the fight for democratic and social rights.

Wijesiriwardena stated that the root of all the socio-economic problems facing the working class and oppressed masses is the systemic breakdown of the world capitalism. “All the other candidates cover up this fact and try to establish that it is a matter of wrong policies implemented by governments, not an expression of the outmoded capitalist system.”

He warned that despite the populist political speeches from other candidates promising everything, austerity measures will be continued whoever comes power and they will rely on the military to suppress social opposition. The fear-mongering campaign of a new threat of terrorism is an attempt to justify military repression.

“Only our party is 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 outdated nation-state system.

The SEP candidate explained the class role of the Tamil bourgeois parties. The separatist LTTE and other parties have proven to be politically bankrupt and impotent to fight for the democratic rights of the people. They appealed to US imperialism and the other major powers to carve out an administration in the North and East where the majority of Tamils are living.

“In 2015 they backed US-orchestrated regime change in Colombo, declaring support for its geo-political interests.” Thoroughly discredited among ordinary people because of the suppression of their rights, the TNA and other parties, like their counterparts in Colombo, are fearful of the developing unity among Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers.”

He added: “Our objective in contesting this election is to organize the working class independently of every faction of the capitalist class against war, austerity and dictatorship on the perspective of international socialism. On this basis we fight for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.”

More than 50 people took part in the second meeting at Oori in Karainagar, which is an island about 20 kilometres west of Jaffna town.

Around 5,000 families live on Karainagar Island in the villages of Maruthapesram, Werapity, Thoppukadu, Neelankadu and Oori. Many more have been displaced as a result of the war. Most people are poor, making their living by fishing or farming. Most houses are thatched huts.

The lack of water affects the whole Jaffna peninsula. A participant at the meeting raised this issue and also unemployment. He told the socialist candidate that he had met him in the last presidential election and social conditions had further deteriorated since then.

Explaining the socialist program needed to solve these issues, Wijesiriwardena said: “The workers should take control of the banks, estates and factories and transnational corporations and place them at the disposal of the public to solve their needs. The accumulated vast sums of wealth will be channelled into large-scale projects to fulfil social needs to generate jobs and create public facilities such as running water.”

“Decreasing working hours per week to 30 hours will generate more job opportunities and create the necessary time for self-development. Land will be redistributed among landless farmers. Only a workers’ and peasants’ government can reject the debt servicing and implement socialist policies. Democratic rights can be won in this fight for socialism,” he concluded.



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