

Sri Lankan SEP holds presidential election meeting in Hatton

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a successful public meeting in Hatton on November 3 as part of its Sri Lankan presidential election campaign. The city is located in the Nuwara-Eliya district, which is dominated by Tamil-speaking tea plantation workers.

Estate workers, including members of the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee, which was formed with the political assistance of the SEP during last December's plantation workers strike, attended the meeting.

In Sri Lanka, nearly 200,000 workers and around one million of their family members live on the plantations in the small line-rooms that lack proper sanitation and other basic facilities. The plantation unions function as instruments of the estate companies and the government, helping to impose their slave-labour conditions and the generational poverty confronting the estate workers.

SEP members and supporters distributed thousands of copies of the SEP's election manifesto, in Tamil and Sinhalese, to plantation workers, including at Fordyce, Tillerie, Injestre in Dickoya, Ann field, Abbotsleigh and Panmure in Hatton, and Olton, Glenugie and Gouravila in Up Cot. Extensive discussions were held with workers and youth on the SEP's socialist program.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which is still the major plantation union, is supporting Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) presidential candidate Gotabhaya Rajapakse. The other three plantation unions—the National Workers Union, Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) and the Up Country People's Front—are backing the United National Party candidate Sajith Premadasa.

Long-standing SEP member K. Kandipan chaired the Hatton meeting, telling the audience that Pani Wijesiriwardena was “the only candidate out of the three dozen individuals contesting the presidential election who bases himself on an international socialist program.” He explained that there was no progressive solution to the myriad social and political facing workers and the oppressed masses in Sri Lanka within the capitalist system.

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah explained that the plantation unions' support for the major parliamentary formations was an attempt to keep workers tied to these right-

wing parties, and referred to DWC leader Mano Ganeshan's interview with *Veerakesari*, a Tamil daily. Ganeshan told the newspaper that his union front had signed an agreement with Sajith Premadasa to “reform the estates” by transforming plantation workers into petty capitalists.

This so-called reform, Thevarajah said, was in order to increase the exploitation of estate workers by assigning them some plantation land and imposing a share-cropping system. “Similarly, the CWC, in a list of 30 demands it submitted to SLPP presidential candidate Gotabhaya Rajapakse, calls for plantation workers to be transformed into small estate owners.”

Thevarajah pointed out that in their appeals to the SLPP and UNP candidates, the plantation unions had dropped any reference to workers' wage claims, or any mention of company and government demands for higher productivity and cuts to social benefits. The speaker explained that the attack on plantation workers was part of an escalating assault on sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

Delivering the main report, Pani Wijesiriwardena said that the long list of promises being made by the major presidential candidates would, under conditions of the severe economic crisis now confronting the Sri Lankan ruling elite, never materialise.

Commenting on the unions' backing for the major parliamentary party candidates, he added: “While the union bureaucrats are desperate to subordinate workers to the false promises of bourgeois candidates, workers have no confidence in these promises.” Whichever government came to power in Sri Lanka, he said, the ruling class, like its counterparts internationally, will swiftly abrogate the social and democratic rights of the working class and oppressed masses.

“After half a century, we are witnessing a resurgence of working-class struggle internationally. These struggles are international, not only in content, but also in form,” the speaker said.

Wijesiriwardena pointed out how striking auto workers in Mexico had formed their own rank-and-file or action committees, independent from the unions, and referred to the decision by Abbotsleigh estate workers to establish their own action committee in December, during last year's national wage strike.

Welcoming the presence of leading members of the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee at the public meeting, the SEP presidential candidate said that the establishment of the action committee “is a powerful example, not only for plantation workers but for workers throughout the island and internationally.”

Wijesiriwardena referred to the Abbotsleigh Action Committee’s resolution supporting the International Committee of the Fourth International’s campaign for the release of WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange. “The witch-hunt against Assange is the high point of the escalating attacks on democratic rights by the ruling classes worldwide,” he said. “The Abbotsleigh estate workers have taken up the defence of Assange. Other workers, here and internationally, must join this counter-offensive in defence of democratic rights.”

Wijesiriwardena explained that the growing threat of another world war, the social counter revolution against the working class, and the threat of dictatorship, could only be overcome through the fight for international socialism. “Providing the leadership and perspective for workers and the oppressed masses is crucial in this fight,” he concluded, and called on workers and youth to join the SEP and build it as the mass revolutionary party of the international working class.

In a powerful expression of the international unity of the working class, the public meeting unanimously passed a resolution supporting the 48,000 victimised Telangana State Road Transport Corporation workers in India, who were sacked by Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao’s government for striking to defend their jobs, wages and conditions.

WSWS reporters spoke with several workers and youth who attended the Hatton meeting.

Prabhakaran from the Abbotsleigh estate said: “This meeting is completely different from other election meetings. The root cause of the workers’ problems and the betrayal of the trade unions were explained, and audience members were given the right to ask questions and talk about these issues at the meeting. The SEP is the only party fighting for a workers’ and peasants’ government. Workers must come forward to build the SEP.”

The leader of the Abbotsleigh Estate Action Committee, P. Sundaralingam, said: “At this meeting I learnt how wealth is accumulated by the capitalists from exploiting workers’ labour, and I learned about the world economic crisis and the danger of world war. No other meeting provides workers with this sort of knowledge.”

M. Salini, a student, said: “I can’t study up to the advanced [university entrance] levels, because my father does not earn enough to pay for private tuition classes and keep up with regular expenses. I’m trying to get a job, but have been unable to find proper employment. I’m currently studying English and computer skills at an NGO, and have to continue that for two years. But I’m not sure I’ll get a proper job after that. Poor

students have no future under the capitalist system.”

WSWS reporters spoke with many workers in the Hatton area during the campaign for the SEP meeting. Many denounced the capitalist parties and the trade unions.

G. Sivakumar, from the Injestre estate in Dickoya, was victimised by management during the plantation workers’ pay struggle in 2016. “Our working conditions are intolerable,” he said.

“The wages are not even enough for food, and so workers have to look for employment outside the estates. Last month in our estate, four workers got early retirement and went to Colombo for work.

“The company is trying to overcome its losses by increasing productivity and cutting our wages. We told the trade unions about the difficult situation we face, but in vain. When we were victimised during the [2016] strike, only your party campaigned for us and explained the treachery of the unions. I agree that workers have to break from the unions and form action committees and also fight for a workers and farmers government.”

S. Rajaratnam, also from the same estate, said: “We don’t want the ruling parties and the trade unions that support them campaigning for the elections on our estate.

Housing is a severe problem here, he continued. “There are 12 families living in line rooms which are called ‘river lines,’ because they are always flooded in the rainy seasons. We complained about this to management, the provincial council and other government institutions, as well as the trade unions, but nobody cared.

“Our children always get sick because dirty water runs into our homes. A small bridge close to our line rooms has been damaged, and it blocks the rain water overflow. This means the water enters our homes. It would cost no more than 60,000 rupees [\$US331] to repair the bridge, but nobody is prepared to do it and save those families.

“Various politicians have come here, promised to build the bridge and asked us to vote for them in past elections. But after the election they never returned. They weren’t prepared to carry out these sorts of small jobs, let alone provide plantation workers with a 1,000- or 1,500-rupee daily wage. Their promises have all been lies but they can’t cheat us all the time.”



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