

Sri Lanka: Pseudo-left NSSP promotes UNP presidential candidate

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Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne recently told the *Gagana* website why his party is running Nandimithra Beddegamage in the presidential election. The purpose is to “turn voters” toward New Democratic Front (NDF) candidate Sajith Premadasa and defeat Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) candidate Gotabhaya Rajapakse. The NDF is an alliance led by the big business United National Party (UNP).

Karunaratne’s statement further exposes the political decay of this pseudo-left organisation and its commitment to the maintenance of capitalist rule. The NSSP leader has been a close collaborator of the right-wing UNP and its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe for about two decades.

Karunaratne attempted to justify the party’s support for Premadasa by claiming the UNP candidate presented “a strong program” against Rajapakse, who was “a terrible fascist” who would “drown the country in a river of tears.”

In another article, Karunaratne declared that “all democratic leaders and all socialist and democratic forces [must] call on voters to vote... to stop a fascist ruler coming to power.” Premadasa, he said, was “the most popular democratic candidate” and “an honest and committed liberalist.”

Karunaratne’s claim that voting for Premadasa will “stop fascism” is a cynical lie.

The SLPP and Rajapakse have deep roots in the military and fascistic Sinhala and Buddhist groups. Former President Mahinda Rajapakse and associates of his government, who now lead the SLPP, conducted a brutal anti-Tamil war while whipping up Sinhala racialism to suppress the struggles of workers and the poor. As defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse played a key role in his brother’s regime.

The SLPP, a right-wing outfit, is attempting to exploit the mass opposition to the current UNP government in a

bid to seize power. But Karunaratne’s promotion of Premadasa is a political trap and desperate attempt to cover up the UNP’s reactionary political history.

The pro-US UNP, which likewise has stoked anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim communalism, began the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983 with the support of the other bourgeois parties. In 1977, the UNP government unleashed its reactionary “open market” program, gutting social and democratic rights—policies that all successive administrations have continued.

In line with the SLPP’s calls for increased “national security”—i.e., the build up toward police-state forms of rule—the UNP candidate has vowed to go beyond the proposals being made by Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

If elected, Premadasa has promised to appoint former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka as defence minister, a clear signal to the ruling elite that he is preparing a repressive regime. Fonseka—with Rajapakse as defense minister—ruthlessly conducted the war against the LTTE, and claims that he is responsible for the military victory in 2009.

As in other countries, each faction of the ruling elite is adopting dictatorial methods to try to suppress the rising opposition of workers, youth, students and the poor to government attacks on social rights and living conditions. The countless promises being showered on the population by the UNP, SLPP and other presidential candidates are in order to hoodwink the people and cover up the reality that they are united in their efforts to establish a repressive regime to defend capitalist rule.

Delivering his policy speech on national television, NSSP candidate Beddegamage claimed that his party was acting in line with the “tendency vowing to take forward “the people’s victory” in 2015, as part of the struggle “for democracy.”

What was this so-called people’s victory?

Former President Mahinda Rajapakse was ousted in a US-orchestrated regime-change operation. The popular opposition to Rajapakse was diverted behind Maithripala Sirisena, handing him the presidency. This had nothing to do with democracy. The purpose was to bring Sri Lankan foreign policy into line with Washington's geo-political manoeuvres against China. The US had no disagreements with Rajapakse's anti-democratic rule but was hostile to his close relations with Beijing.

As soon as Sirisena took office, the cash-strapped UNP-led government turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and began ruthlessly imposing its austerity measures. Colombo claims it has increased public sector workers' wages by 107 percent since 2015. But in 2017 and 2018 alone, real wages declined by 7 percent and 2 percent respectively. As the same time, the government has routinely imposed essential service orders to ban workers' strikes, and unleashed police violence against protesting students.

While Sirisena promised to investigate the human rights violations during the civil war, his "unity government" with Prime Minister Wickremesinghe swept war crimes investigations under the carpet. The military occupation of the island's North and the East continues, and the armed forces have been integrated with the US military and its preparations for war against China.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe also dropped their promises to abolish the autocratic executive presidency and only reduced some presidential powers through a constitutional amendment.

In 2015, N SSP leader Karunaratne ludicrously described Sirisena's elevation into the presidency as a "February Revolution." A year later, he denounced strikes by workers as a conspiracy against the government. He claimed that the IMF's austerity measures were essential for development.

Following this year's April 21 terrorist attacks, Karunaratne participated in an all-party conference and fully backed the military's deployment throughout the country and the imposition of draconian emergency laws.

Lurching further to the right, the N SSP leader has routinely denounced the fight for a socialist program, declaring that the priority is to defend "democracy"—that is, to maintain UNP rule.

In his national television speech, the N SSP's Beddegamage explicitly attacked those fighting for socialism. He insisted that they facilitated racialist, fascist forces by "ranting socialist mantras... grabbing a portion of people's votes and putting them into dustbin."

This reactionary statement is an expression of the hostility of the upper middle class layers and the capitalist class as a whole toward the developing struggles of the working class and the fight for socialism.

Workers must politically prepare to fight the counterrevolutionary attacks that will be unleashed, whether Rajapakse or Premadasa is elected president.

Workers and youth can go forward only by establishing their political independence from every section of the bourgeoisie and rallying the rural poor and all those who are attacked by capitalism. This means fighting for a workers' and peasants' government on the basis of a socialist program, as part of the struggle for international socialism. This is the program advanced by Pani Wijesiriwardena, the Socialist Equality Party's presidential candidate.

The N SSP and its leader Karunaratne represent a Pabloite tendency that broke from the Fourth International and its Trotskyist program about seven decades ago (see: "The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 12").

Whilst the N SSP once claimed allegiance to Trotskyism, the political hallmark of this organisation has been the betrayal of working-class independence and its alignment with this or that capitalist party. The N SSP has been reduced to shambles and is acting as an open appendage of the UNP.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only organisation that has fought for the political independence of the working class and its mobilisation on the basis of an international socialist program. This is the sole perspective that can take forward the emerging struggles of the workers and the rural masses.

We urge workers and young people to study the principled record and socialist program of the SEP and support its candidate, Pani Wijesiriwardena, in the November 16 presidential election.



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