

Sri Lankan daily interviews SEP presidential candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena

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Pani Wijesiriwardena, candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka's forthcoming presidential elections, was interviewed last week, on 8 November, by the island nation's most popular daily English language newspaper, the Daily Mirror. Wijesiriwardena is the only socialist internationalist candidate contesting the elections. The SEP has advanced a program to build a socialist movement against imperialist war, austerity and dictatorship. We republish below the text of the interview, by journalist Gihan de Chikera, under the title "Capitalism offers no solutions to the dangers facing workers: Pani Wijesiriwardena"

Q. At the recent 'Public Platform' at the Sugathadasa Stadium, you said that the SEP was different to the other parties contesting the 2019 presidential election. What makes you different?

A. Our difference mainly lies in our programme. Our programme is not to reform the existing capitalist system, but to abolish it and replace it with a socialist system. A socialist system needs international implementation, and hence our programme is international. The programme for Sri Lanka is an integral part of that international programme. In Sri Lanka, our history is unique. During the past 51 years we have never compromised with any other bourgeois party, or the appendages of bourgeois parties, such as the pseudo-left.

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

We stress that there is no solution to the 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. Our solution lies in the abolition of the profit system, by unifying workers throughout South Asia and the world to refashion society to meet the needs of the majority of humanity, not

the profits of the ultra-rich few.

Q. You say the Sri Lankan working class is part of a global movement. Do Sri Lankan workers themselves believe this?

A. Most workers are yet to grasp this objective truth and organise accordingly. Hence it is not an accomplished fact. However, the laws of history are powerful, and they are making inroads into the consciousness of the working class everywhere. Working-class struggles are now erupting in country after country. The most recent are in Chile and Lebanon. These two seemingly disparate countries were brought to a halt by working people, facing similar grievances rooted in the historic and systemic crisis of global capitalism. We have no doubt that the Sri Lankan working class will grasp that it is a part of a global movement, sooner rather than later.

Moreover, this resurgence of international class struggle demonstrates the objective unity of the working class. So our presidential campaign is focused on building a revolutionary working-class leadership with our sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), for the struggles ahead in Sri Lanka, South Asia and globally.

Q. Poverty, unemployment and job insecurity are major concerns. How do you propose to tackle these?

A. Our manifesto proposes to expropriate big business and redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor. We propose a job expansion programme by reducing the working week to 30 hours, without any loss of pay. Employment can be created through implementing a public works programme to build public housing, schools, hospitals and roads. All workers have the right to secure well-paid jobs, with a living wage indexed to inflation. Also, the contract labour system must be abolished.

Q. What do you think of farmers and workers being encouraged to become small-scale entrepreneurs?

A. With the soaring profits of the big business multinationals, there is very little space for so-called entrepreneurs. International finance capital is sweeping through countries like sharks, seeking profits. Hence it's a fallacy that farmers or workers can become successful small-

scale entrepreneurs. Such stories are promoted by the big business media to deceive the people and defend the capitalist system.

In any case, farmers are already small-scale entrepreneurs. We would categorize them as petty-bourgeois. As you know, these farmers are oppressed and trapped within the clutches of big business, the multinational corporations and the banks. Many thousands who have been unable to repay their loans have committed suicide in Sri Lanka and in other under-developed countries. So much for entrepreneurship.

Q. National security is being raised by some candidates. How important is this?

A. The security of the working population must be assured against the oppressive capitalist state, which is the defender of big business and the ruling elite. The main parties are aiming to establish a police-military state to suppress the aspirations of working people and the youth. Hence the working class will have to establish its own action committees in workplaces to organise the security of the workers.

Moreover, humanity as a whole is threatened by an imperialist third world war. The US is encircling China and threatening to ignite a world war to defend its hegemony. It has already ignited wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Nearby, nuclear-armed India and Pakistan are engaged in warmongering. To eradicate the security threat, imperialism must be wiped out.

On the other hand, terrorism is a reactionary response to capitalist oppression. In many cases, the ruling class instigates and encourages terrorism to utilize it later against the working class and the masses. Many people experienced this during the 30-year communal war. After the April 21 terrorist bomb attacks by Islamist militants, the government declared a state of emergency and imposed anti-democratic measures. The utter cynicism of the government and its allies was underscored by the fact that senior national leaders and defence officials knew of the attacks, and did nothing. They allowed the slaughter of hundreds of innocent people, in order to exploit the tragedy for their own political purposes. The real target of the police state measures and the anti-Muslim campaign is not terrorism, but the working class.

Q. The major parties are calling for a strong leadership and stable government to achieve social and economic prosperity. Can this be achieved?

A. Strong leadership and stable government for the ruling class means erecting a police-military state to curb working class resistance against the IMF-dictated austerity policies. It is an assurance to global financial capital that the country is a safe haven for investment and for the uninterrupted exploitation of labour. This will serve the profit-hungry

capitalist elite at the expense of the country's working-class and oppressed masses.

Q. Another slogan is the eradication of corruption. Can the country be developed if corruption is eliminated?

A. Contemporary capitalism is rotten to the core and corruption is inherent within it. The issue is that a portion of looted profits from the working class is distributed among the corrupt allies of the exploiters, one way or the other. For example, business commissions are part of profit sharing. There is no way for contemporary capitalism to be purified from corruption. So this slogan is aimed at deceiving the working people and nothing else. To abolish corruption, the whole capitalist system must be overturned and socialism established.

Q. Presidential elections are often seen as a two-horse race, where voters must pick the "lesser evil." Do you agree?

A. This is a fraud, imposed on the public by the defenders of capitalism, particularly the pseudo-left.

The experience of the working class has been that the so-called "lesser evil" always clears the path for the greater evil. When people vote to bring down an oppressive regime by voting for a capitalist alternative, thinking it is the lesser evil, in no time they realise they have been driven into a trap by the so-called "left" parties and trade unions.

Through these methods, moribund capitalism tries to survive until the working class challenges it with a socialist alternative. Our task is to arm the working class with this socialist programme.

Q. With many left parties running, one can ask what it means to be "left" and "progressive" in today's political context?

A. Here, I'd like to go back to your first question and emphasize that "left" and "progressive," in today's context, should refer to an internationalist socialist programme and the party that defends it. All others, in one way or the other, are appendages of capitalism. We call them the "pseudo-left," and the working class must politically do away with them as soon as possible.



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