

Sri Lanka: SEP presidential candidate exposes pseudo-lefts' pro-capitalist program at university debate

Our correspondents
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About 1,000 students attended a debate involving several Sri Lankan presidential candidates at the University of Kelaniya on November 4. Entitled “Image or Policy?” the event was organised by the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF).

Presidential candidates included Pani Wijesiriwardena from the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), Duminda Nagamuwa for the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and Rohan Pallewatte from the National Development Front. Srinath Perera, Milinda Rajapakse and Mahinda Jayasinghe participated on behalf of the United Socialist Party (USP), the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) respectively.

In the first round, SEP candidate Wijesiriwardena outlined the principled basis of the party’s program. “Our policies are based on those of the Bolshevik Party, which led the Russian Revolution in 1917. Against all forms of nationalism and opportunism, we fight for internationalism and the political independence of the working class.”

He pointed out that the SEP, and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, fought to unify Sinhala and Tamil workers on an international socialist program against successive Colombo governments’ war against the Tamil oppressed masses, and against Tamil separatism.

Referring to the SEP’s election manifesto title, “Build a socialist movement against imperialist war, austerity and dictatorship,” Wijesiriwardena explained that the dangers facing the masses were a result of the systemic breakdown of world capitalism.

“The response of the ruling classes everywhere to this breakdown has been to impose the burden on workers and the oppressed masses, and to move towards dictatorial methods aimed at brutally suppressing popular opposition.”

The crisis of capitalism, he continued, had produced an intensification of trade conflicts between rival nation states and the growing danger of a catastrophic world war. The only way the working class could halt this was by fighting for an international socialist perspective. “The SEP and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting to build revolutionary parties and to

mobilise the international working class.”

The SEP candidate accused all the other presidential candidates of concealing the danger of war and said that all the talk about “national security” was in order to prepare for the establishment of fascist or military-styled governments, against the working class.

FSP candidate Duminda Nagamuwa introduced himself as a “socialist candidate,” but did not use the word “socialism” in his contributions to the debate. He argued that the government “did not have to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the masses” but could “obtain the necessary funds by taxing the company owners’ 86 percent share of the gross domestic product.” In other words, Nagamuwa proposed a reformist program of taxing the rich whilst maintaining capitalism.

Speaking on behalf of the United Socialist Party (USP), Srinath Perera tried to create confusion about working-class internationalism. He introduced himself as the representative of a party based on the working class and affiliated with the Committee for a Workers’ International. He did not, however, make any reference to the issues facing the international working class, or to the threat of an imperialist world war.

Pani Wijesiriwardena further discussed the SEP’s program in response to a video speech by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who claimed that “public education” could be expanded while maintaining private education.

Wijesiriwardena said public education could not be maintained when capitalism was in crisis, and that it was a lie to claim opportunities for education could be expanded within this system. “We speak about a systemic breakdown of capitalism that has emerged from its own internal contradictions, and which is impacting on the lives of workers and the oppressed masses in the form of austerity measures, including cuts in education.”

The SEP presidential candidate said the JVP’s so-called “economic development” program, and its calls for increased international capital investment, were like those of the other capitalist parties. He explained that governments throughout the region were attempting to attract international capital by

stepping up their attacks on workers' rights and imposing cheap-labor conditions.

In the question and answer session, Wijesiriwardena was asked how the SEP was different to the FSP and USP. He replied by explaining that his party's socialist program was based on internationalism.

The FSP and USP, and the other pseudo-left parties, he said, were hostile to internationalism and the political independence of the working class, and were attempting to mislead workers, students and the oppressed masses by claiming the capitalist system could be reformed.

"Nagamuwa claims that popular grievances can be addressed by taking a share of the income of Sri Lankan company owners. The USP says money can be levied from the children of capitalists going to 'super schools,' and spent on poor children's education. Both of these are capitalist programs."

Another student asked why Wijesiriwardena had described the FSP and the USP as pseudo-left.

Nagamuwa answered by falsely claiming that he did not advocate the theory of socialism in one country, but in the same breath voiced his hostility to the fight for international socialism.

"When this issue [of international socialism] is posed everywhere, it is difficult to build up belief in this program," he said. "We have to start from the existing situation. We cannot go for revolution in India tomorrow. We represent the Sri Lankan sub-section of the revolution."

Wijesiriwardena told the audience that Nagamuwa's so-called international socialism was "an amalgam of national programs" and an upside-down version of the internationalism developed by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky.

The SEP presidential candidate quoted Leon Trotsky, who had famously explained that an "international program must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole, in all its connections and contradictions, that is, with the mutually antagonistic interdependence of its separate parts."

The SEP in Sri Lanka, and all the national sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, Wijesiriwardena continued, had been developed on the basis of a single international perspective.

Another audience member asked about the difference between SEP and the USP.

In a vile nationalist outburst, USP representative Srinath Perera attempted to denigrate the ICFI and SEP, claiming that the SEP's US presidential candidate had "toured" Sri Lanka because it "does not have a base in America."

Long-standing SEP member Ananda Wakkumbura spoke from the audience. "American presidential elections are a central factor impacting on world politics," he said. "The decision of the Trotskyist presidential candidate to address the international working class is an important internationalist

decision."

Perera denounced the SEP for not joining the so-called anti-SAITM struggle, a series of protests against a private medical college. The agitation was organised by the FSP-controlled IUSF and aligned itself with right-wing organisations, such as the Sinhala racist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna. Backed by the USP and other pseudo-left formations, protest organisers insisted that the government could be pressured to stop the college.

Perera also glorified the USP's support for *Eluka Tamil* (Rise up Tamil!), a communalist movement founded on the initiative of C. V. Wigneswaran, former chief minister of the northern provincial council. In a clear statement of the USP's adaptation to communalist politics and the capitalist class, Perera declared: "Because there is no leftward movement of the Tamil masses, we join with the struggle of the Tamil masses to support Tamil capitalist representatives."

The SEP's Wijesiriwardena told the audience that the USP had nothing to do with Trotskyism and briefly reviewed the political struggle against Pabloite opportunism and the establishment of the ICFI in 1953.

Michael Pablo, then secretary of the Fourth International, he explained, had rejected the fundamentals of Trotskyism, attributing a progressive role to the Stalinist bureaucracy, and rejecting the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity of building revolutionary parties. The SEP's candidate said that Pabloite revisionism had paved the way for immense betrayals internationally, and that "Perera and the USP represent the extension of that Pabloite camp against Trotskyism."

Concluding his speech, Wijesiriwardena said: "Economic production today has integrated globally, but the contradiction between globalised economy and the nation state system poses the threat of a world war. The fight against war and for international socialism means the resolution of these contradictions by the intervention of the international working class. I urge you to join the SEP, to fight for international socialism and to become a daily reader of the *World Socialist Web Site*."



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