

Sri Lankan Trotskyists begin election campaign with online meeting

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka launched its campaign for the 2020 general election with a live online meeting on its Facebook page last Sunday. The SEP is fielding a total of 43 candidates in three districts—Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya. Its election manifesto, “Fight for an international socialist program against war, social devastation and dictatorship” was published by the *World Socialist Web Site* on March 21.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias’s address to the meeting was delivered in Sinhala and translated into Tamil. Over 100 people from Sri Lanka and internationally participated in the March 22 event, which was held amid a three-day COVID-19 national curfew. More than 2,000 have since viewed the video.

Most of those who initially watched the meeting have shared it on their Facebook feeds. Many added greetings or commented during the event, including making requests for more comprehensive online educational sessions. Some of those attending have emailed their observations about the SEP’s policies (see: “Sri Lankan workers and young people endorse SEP’s election program”).

Reviewing the current situation in Sri Lanka, Dias told the meeting: “Although it’s legitimate to restrict peoples’ movements to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the curfew is now being used illegally by the government, different heads of the armed forces and state bureaucrats to impose their authority over the people.

“What currently exists is a police curfew. This is because President Rajapakse is constitutionally restricted from declaring a state of emergency. For it to be legally valid the dissolved parliament must be recalled to approve it within 10 days. The government has decided to avoid this procedure because it did not

have a majority in the now dissolved parliament. Instead, Rajapakse has used the curfew to autocratically lock down the island and put the military in charge.”

Dias said that the army and police, under the pretext of tracking down those who may be infected with coronavirus, were conducting search operations across the country. Police-military road blocks, reminiscent of the 30-year anti-Tamil war, have been established.

The speaker said that although the election commission chairman had suddenly, without any constitutional basis, “requested a stop to all political activities in the country in order to concentrate energies on virus eradication” the SEP was asserting its democratic rights and proceeding with its online meeting.

Dias drew attention to the recent police shooting of protesting inmates in one of Sri Lanka’s intolerably overcrowded prisons. “A few days ago the government limited the number of visitors to a prisoner to one person per week,” he explained.

“This provocative order heightened tensions among prisoners and led to a prisoners’ protest at Anuradhapura jail. The police opened fire and killed two prisoners, while injuring several others.”

The last time police shot and killed protestors in Sri Lanka was in 2013 during the administration of President Mahinda Rajapakse, the older brother of the current president.

The SEP general secretary noted that the first coronavirus infection was reported in China last December. “Given global economic, commercial and social activities, it should not have been difficult to realise that this virus could rapidly spread all around the world. No ruling class in any country, however, paid any attention to the danger for several weeks.

“The eyes of the Sri Lankan ruling class were opened

when a female Chinese tourist to the country was diagnosed as a COVID-19 patient on January 7 at the airport as she was about to return home. She fully recovered from the infection, in Sri Lanka, and returned home on January 21.

“The Sri Lankan government, however, took no precautionary measures over the next 50 days. It did not even issue a public warning about the virus threat, until a tourist guide was found to be infected on March 12,” Dias stated.

“The callous and indifferent response of the Sri Lankan government to the dangers posed by this contagious virus was not unique but similar to the reaction of capitalist governments internationally. The sole concern of capitalism everywhere is the production of profit, not the well-being of the producers.”

The SEP general secretary noted the comments of Indian Council of Medical Research chief Balaam Bargava, who rejected immediate mass testing for COVID-19, claiming community transmission had not begun in that country.

“How many lives have to be sacrificed to convince the rulers about the need of mass testing?” Dias asked. He referred to the warnings of the former Indian Medical Council chief that tens of thousands could be killed by COVID-19.

“One of the most drastic examples of the barbaric nature of capitalism is revealed in US President Donald Trump’s attitude towards the masses of Iran,” Dias said. He explained that US sanctions on that country mean thousands are dying from COVID-19 in Iran.

“This tragic situation raises the very pertinent question: What is the response of the ruling elites of the Arab world to this barbaric act of imperialism?”

“None of the bourgeois regimes is ready to come forward to rescue the Iranian masses from the clutches of imperialism. This is a vivid confirmation of the Trotskyist theory of Permanent Revolution—that no national bourgeoisie of any subjugated or semi-subjugated nation is capable of representing the interests of the masses of their own country against imperialism. The defence of fundamental rights, democratic and social, can be achieved only through the establishment of working-class power, supported by the multi-million rural poor.”

Under conditions of war and other disasters, Dias continued, “The political and social consciousness of

the working people and youth becomes receptive to alternative political programs to counter capitalist barbarism.

“This situation requires the intervention of the revolutionary party, armed with the program of socialist internationalism that is decisive for the development of political consciousness among workers, the rural poor and youth of all communities and the struggle to overthrow capitalist rule.”

Dias explained that the Rajapakse administration faced growing popular opposition and noted the three-day national strike by 200,000 teachers; walkouts by plantation workers over the nonpayment of a promised wage increase and ongoing protests outside the Presidential Secretariat by sacked temporary and contract workers. The Rajapakse regime, he added, also confronted a deep-going financial crisis that had been intensified by the coronavirus pandemic.

While those hardest-hit were daily wage workers and those employed in informal sectors, the government, Dias said, had no plans to ameliorate the worsening conditions of ordinary people.

As part of its election campaign, the SEP was demanding the immediate launch of mass-testing for coronavirus, for all foreign debt payments to be stopped immediately and for a massive building program to be initiated to establish new, well-equipped hospitals. Vast sums must be allocated for free health services. All working people and the poor should be guaranteed the income necessary for decent living conditions.

None of these demands, Dias emphasised, could be fulfilled under the profit system. Capitalism must be overthrown and replaced by a workers and farmers government to implement a socialist program.

The foundation of the SEP’s perspective, he concluded, was for a republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of a federation of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally. Dias urged workers, young people and intellectuals to study its policies and to join and build the SEP as a mass revolutionary party.



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