

Sri Lankan Trotskyists hold first online election rally

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held the party's first election rally for the 2020 general Sri Lankan elections streamed on its Facebook page on June 28. The SEP is fielding a total of 43 candidates in the Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya districts. The elections are scheduled for August 5.

The meeting was addressed by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, leading election candidates and a member of IYSSE. Around 100 people from Sri Lanka and internationally participated in the event. About 2,000 have since viewed the video, with many added greetings or comments.

Vilani Peiris, a longstanding SEP member and the leader of the Colombo district party slate, chaired the meeting. She said that President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) hope to win a two-thirds majority in the parliament in order to rewrite the constitution and allow him to assume dictatorial powers.

The official opposition parties, she said, have only minor tactical differences with Rajapakse. She pointed out that the pseudo-left organisations aid the capitalist parties.

"The Nava Sama Samaja Party leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne is contesting the election under the banner of pro-imperialist United National Party. The Frontline Socialist Party has expressed readiness to rally with 'progressive elements' in right-wing parties 'to defend democracy.' In its election campaign the SEP oppose all these parties and fights for political independence of the working class and for socialist policies."

W.A Sunil, a member of the SEP Political Committee and a candidate in the Colombo district, said that big business, with the Rajapakse government's support, is carrying out massive job and wage cuts in order to impose the economic burden of pandemic crisis on all working people. He explained how the trade unions were active partners in this onslaught.

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah is leading the SEP's list in the Nuwara Eliya district. He told the meeting how the government and the corporations are forcing employees back to work without proper COVID-19 protection and health care facilities.

"Plantation employers, with the assistance of unions, have cut

wages and increased workloads. Sporadic struggles have erupted," he said, noting that workers at one estate in Maskeliya are fighting to form an action committee to defend their wages and conditions.

Speaking on behalf of the IYSSE, Prageeth Aravinda said that the hurried re-opening of the economy has increased the threat to the lives of young people worldwide.

"Young workers face economic disaster due to job cuts amid COVID-19," he said, adding that the government decision to re-open schools without providing proper coronavirus protection was putting students as well as teachers at risk. "Youth and students can only defend their right to education and proper health care by uniting in a struggle to develop an independent political movement of the working class," he said.

Wije Dias, delivering the final speech, said that COVID-19 has exposed the viciousness of the international capitalist system before the masses in every country. The explosion of world capitalist crisis, which began with the crisis of international banking and financial system in 2008, has been aggravated to an unprecedented level by the pandemic.

Dias pointed out that the international working class had started to resist government and company demands that they ignore the dangers posed by COVID-19 and return to work.

Broad sections of the working class, particularly in the auto industry in US, are recognising that neither the trade unions nor any bourgeois party will come to their aid in this life-threatening situation. Workers have taken the initiative to organise independent rank-and-file committees to defend their jobs and their lives, he said.

As workers' resistance increases, Dias continued, President Donald Trump is intensifying his social counter-revolutionary measures at home and his war policy abroad.

"This is the political context of the elections in Sri Lanka. Under these conditions, where there is no democratic environment, a fair election is not possible. Exploiting the pandemic, President Rajapakse's government has intensified its moves towards a presidential dictatorship," Dias said.

The speaker explained said that Rajapakse had won the presidential election by exploiting the mass anger against Sirisena and Wickremesinghe's so-called "good governance" administration. He promised "disciplined and efficient" rule.

These promises have been exposed in the first six months of his regime as bogus.

“The Sri Lankan ruling class is well aware that it will face insurmountable political challenges from the broad resistance developing among the working class, rural poor and youth to the austerity program that it will implement in the coming months. Preparing for this development, Rajapakse has placed retired and in-service military officers in almost all key centres of power and called for a two-thirds parliamentary majority at this general election.”

Pointing to dangers facing the working class and the SEP, Dias said: “The real meaning of the ‘efficiency’ intended by the Rajapakse regime was exposed when we posed some questions to the secretary of the Defence Ministry, retired major general Kamal Gunaratne, about the harassment of three SEP candidates contesting the election in the Jaffna district.

“On three different occasions, men from the military intelligence unit have visited our comrades’ homes and demanded they provide personal information about themselves and their families.”

Dias explained that the SEP sent its first letter to the defence secretary on June 20 and demanded a prompt reply.

“No reply has been received, not even an acknowledgement, let alone an explanation for the illegal intervention by the military against the SEP’s constitutionally guaranteed rights. The lesson is that Rajapakse’s ‘efficiency’ only applies to its suppression of democratic rights.

“The military harassment and witch hunt against the SEP is because the ruling elite knows that it is the only party that opposes the continued military occupation of the North and East. The SEP is also the only party that fights for the release of all political prisoners and campaigns for a proper accounting of the forcible disappearances of people during the war,” he said.

The speaker reviewed the political role of the pseudo-lefts and particularly the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) leaders who attempt to hoodwink the working people and youth. “They call for a common platform of all those interested in democracy, in the name of defending democratic rights. This is like the reactionary and fraudulent campaign conducted by the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party in protest against the murders carried out during the former Mahinda Rajapakse regime. These organisations established a ‘platform of freedom’ and used it to promote the right-wing [UNP leader] Ranil Wickremesinghe as a defender of freedom, thus paving the way for him to become prime minister in 2015...

“They did not divulge whose freedom they defend... Likewise, the FSP does not speak about this in their agitation for democracy. Their abstract slogans for freedom or democracy are political traps for the working people and youth.

“There are burning issues in relation to the democratic rights of people in Sri Lanka. This is because it is a capitalist country, with a historically belated development, and therefore has many unresolved democratic problems. We of the Fourth

International, basing ourselves on Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution, insist that these democratic problems can find no solutions under capitalist rule.

“Solutions to these questions can only be achieved under a dictatorship of the working class,” Dias said. He explained that the reformists, pseudo-lefts and the trade union bureaucracies, which tail end one or another one of the bourgeois parties, block this path.

“Thirty years of war in Sri Lanka, has added new democratic problems for the oppressed Tamil community in the North and East. Large areas of agricultural lands cultivated for many generations by the Tamil community have been grabbed by the military and exploited under their control. Other land is used for military camps. Only a workers’ and peasants’ government can address these democratic issues.”

Dias urged listeners to read and discuss the SEP’s international socialist program. “We propose the building of action committees in all workplaces and agricultural areas, as well as in education and cultural sectors, to fight for the fundamental demands of the respective sectors in the struggle for a socialist program.”

Dias concluded by explaining that the SEP are producing four newsletters (*panivida*) for workers in the garment, health, education and immigrant sectors and called on all workers in these areas to register as subscribers for their respective *p anivida*.

“The SEP is dedicated to the fight for an international socialist perspective within the working class in Sri Lanka and South Asia and we invite all the listeners this meeting to join us in that fight.”

The author also recommends:

Fight for an international socialist program against war, social devastation and dictatorship

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