

Sri Lankan Trotskyists hold final online election meeting

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which fielded a total of 43 candidates for the Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya districts, held its third and concluding election meeting on August 2. It followed a vigorous campaign by SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters in the three election districts and other key parts of the country.

The event was streamed on the SEP's Facebook page and attended by about 100 people from Sri Lanka and internationally. More than 1,500 people later viewed the video with scores of others posting greetings, comments and questions.

While the COVID-19 pandemic limited face to face interactions, SEP and IYSSE campaigners distributed thousands of copies of its "Fight against war, social devastation and dictatorship" election manifesto. Discussions were held with workers and young people in the railways, irrigation facilities, ports, major free trade zones and tea plantations.

The August 2 meeting was chaired by SEP Political Committee member and Colombo district candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena. He began by explaining how COVID-19 had deepened the economic and political crisis of the Sri Lankan capitalist class.

"The Rajapakse government is determined to impose the full burden of this crisis onto the backs of the working class and the poor. Knowing well that the harsh measures will provoke workers' opposition, Rajapakse is moving towards a presidential dictatorship in order to crush this resistance," he said. "As part of this right-wing agenda, Rajapakse and his chauvinist allies have instigated an anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim campaign to divide and weaken the working class."

Wijesiriwardena said the ruling elites everywhere have responded to the pandemic by imposing austerity

measures and handing over trillions of dollars to the financial oligarchy. The speaker explained that about 400,000 manufacturing sector jobs had been eliminated in Sri Lanka even as the government provided funds to big business and backed company wage and job cuts.

Wijesiriwardena noted the rising resistance of workers internationally and said this would further develop in the coming months. The SEP and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, he said, will fight to mobilise this working-class movement with an international socialist perspective. "Our intervention in this election is part of that struggle," he said.

The next speaker Vilani Peiris, who leads the Colombo district SEP slate, reviewed the election campaigns of the capitalist and pseudo-left parties. "No section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie," she said, has a progressive solution to the economic crisis they face.

"The Rajapakse government is trying to borrow heavily from China and the international financial institutions. Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the United National Party, claims he has the potential to build the economy by borrowing from the International Monetary Fund. All of them are prepared to drag the country into a huge debt trap and impose it on workers and the poor," Peiris said.

The speaker noted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's response to port worker protests against the proposed sale of a terminal at the Colombo Port to an Indian company. "Rajapakse publicly declared that he will not be intimidated by such action. This means that privatisation will continue irrespective of workers' opposition."

Peiris said the militarisation of Rajapakse's administration, which was in order to take on the working class, was not challenged by the opposition

parties or the pseudo-left because “they all fear the developing class struggle.”

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah, who headed the party’s list in Nuwara Eliya, told the meeting that the Tamil nationalist parties wanted more seats in parliament in order to secure a better deal with whoever won government. The Tamil National Alliance, he said, has publicly promised to negotiate in a “meaningful way” with Rajapakse, even as he is preparing a dictatorship.

Thevarajah reviewed the Tamil nationalists’ orientation towards the imperialist powers and their endorsement of Washington’s preparations for war against China. The democratic rights of oppressed Tamils can only be won, he said, by opposing these reactionary positions and fighting for the unity of workers across ethnic lines to overthrow capitalism and establish a Sri Lanka-Eelam socialist republic as part of a union of South Asia socialist republics.

The speaker said that the major plantation unions, including the Ceylon Workers Congress, were assisting the companies to impose greater productivity and exploitation. “Workers and their families are being given small plots of the plantation to look after. This means the whole family will have to toil to earn a living income. This is another slave labour system,” he said, and called for plantation workers to build independent action committees and fight for “workers’ control of the production.

Speaking on behalf of the IYSSE, Dinesh Hemal explained Colombo’s attacks on education and students. “Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that these austerity measures are threatening the lives of students. Many schools cannot provide the minimum measures required to prevent the pandemic spreading.”

Hemal also pointed to the government’s anti-democratic attacks on students. “The government has deployed intelligence officers in the universities to hunt down student activists.” Although students were resisting this repression, he continued, their struggle could only be advanced by turning to the working class and fighting for socialism.

Concluding the online meeting, Pani Wijesiriwardena thanked all those who had supported the SEP’s defence campaign against the military harassment of the party’s Jaffna district candidates.

The anti-democratic military provocations, he said,

are a part of an international response by the ruling classes everywhere to the growing influence of the international Trotskyist movement. “In Germany, for example, the government has decided to place the SEP on its state surveillance list, whilst in the US, SEP presidential candidates are being anti-democratically deprived of ballot access.”

Wijesiriwardena noted the actions of US autoworkers and teachers against unsafe COVID-19 returns-to-work and the nationwide mass demonstrations over the police murder of George Floyd.

These developments, he said, are indications of the growing opposition of the working class and youth against capitalist reaction. “The protests were not just a response to Floyd’s murder but an explosion of social anger against deep social inequality in the US.”

The speaker referred to mass protests in Sri Lanka against privatisation of a Colombo Port terminal. Workers were propelled into action, he said, by a broad range of issues, including the deterioration of working and living conditions.

“Although the trade union bureaucracies are trying to dissipate workers’ anger with a limited protest, this struggle directly raises the political necessity of defeating the government’s IMF-dictated policies.”

Wijesiriwardena concluded the meeting by stressing that the SEP was contesting the elections in order to unite and mobilise workers as a single international class.

“The SEP’s central aim is to organise workers independently of the unions and the capitalist parties and assist them to build their own action committees. Our political program is the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government in the form of a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of the fight for international socialism.”



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