

Sri Lanka: SEP's local government election campaign wins support in Colombo outer-suburb

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka has begun its campaign for the March 9 local government elections. The party is fielding 53 candidates across three local government bodies: the Kolonnawa Urban Council in Colombo district, Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in Nuwaraeliya district in the central plantations, and the Karainagar Pradeshiya Sabha in Jaffna district.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)-led government previously attempted to postpone these elections, fearing that widespread popular opposition would result in a humiliating electoral defeat.

The SEP is intervening in the local elections as a part of its struggle to build an independent movement of the working class and the rural masses on an international socialist perspective. The SEP is mobilising workers, youth and the rural poor on an anti-war program and to fight the government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

Last week a SEP team campaigned at Meethotamulla in the Kolonnawa area, a Colombo outer-suburb, distributing copies of party literature, including its statement, "For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses in Sri Lanka!" Published on July 20, 2022, the statement calls for a national campaign by working people and youth to establish independent action committees in workplaces and suburbs as the basis for sending delegates to a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses.

Campaigners discussed with workers and youth the political and economic roots of Sri Lanka's current crisis which has been intensified by the COVID-19

pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. They explained the role being played by the parliamentary opposition parties, the SEP's socialist program, and the need for action committees.

Meethotamulla is a densely populated mainly low-income area. Many of its residents are daily wage workers, employed in warehouses, small packing plants and the local council. Others work as three-wheel vehicle drivers, shoemakers and street vendors.

Residents readily engaged in political discussion with SEP campaigners. The majority vehemently denounced the politicians of successive Sri Lankan governments, angrily explaining how they were attempting to deal with the worsening economic and social disaster. Some had participated in last year's mass protests against the Rajapakse government. Many accused past and present governments of destroying the lives of their children.

One widow explained how her family was struggling to survive under escalating increases in the cost of living. "We live on my son's wage [as a construction worker], but he does not get continuous work because the construction industry has been affected by the rising cost of cement. He earns 3,000 rupees [\$US8] a day. We do not have lunch and dinner, only breakfast. I've pawned my jewelry but am now unable to get it released," she said.

She also complained about lack of medicines at Colombo National Hospital where she is being treated for diabetes, high cholesterol, and kidney problems. SEP campaigners explained that the crisis in the hospitals were a result of health expenditure cuts by successive Sri Lankan governments, in line with austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Almost six years ago, on April 14, 2017, a huge garbage dump in the area collapsed as people were celebrating the Sinhala and Tamil new year. Dozens of homes were destroyed and 32 people killed, some of them buried alive. The SEP launched an independent workers inquiry into the tragedy, exposing the criminal responsibility of successive governments and the capitalist profit system.

Gayani, a housewife, sorrowfully explained how the garbage dump collapse killed three family members and relatives. Her husband, a Colombo Municipal Council worker, had one of his legs seriously injured in the disaster. “My disabled husband still goes to work but under difficult circumstances. Life is getting harder and harder and, on top of that, there are no medicines in the hospitals,” she said.

“There is no hope of voting for any of these politicians,” Gayani said, voicing her disgust with all bourgeois politicians. “But we know about you,” she added, recalling the SEP’s independent workers inquiry into garbage dump tragedy. She purchased a copy of the SEP’s book on the investigation. After campaigners explained the importance of forming of an action committee in her neighbourhood, said she was willing to join.

A mother of four children condemned all the political parties. “When someone like you comes along talking about politics, we get angry. Neighbours say they don’t want to talk to them [politicians],” she said.

“We are so frustrated because it doesn’t matter who is voted in, it’s useless. Voting is important, but only because we need it for the children’s school admissions. Politicians only come around during the elections. After that they’re nowhere to be seen.”

Kaushalya, a female worker, with a daughter in grade 8, and a son in grade 9, said: “The closure of small factories has deprived many people of getting employment. And whenever they get work, it’s only for two or three days a week. My husband works at the urban council. His basic salary is just 20,000 rupees [\$US54] but after debt installments are deducted, there’s nothing.

“Although many workers try to migrate to other countries there are risks with this. But how can we live [without earning income from foreign jobs] and send our children to schools? A pair of shoes is 4,500 rupees and a school bag 4,000 rupees,” she added.

She agreed with the SEP’s fight to independently mobilise the working class on a socialist program and said she would organise a discussion about forming an action committee in the area.

Hassan, a young three-wheel vehicle driver, had previously voted for Wickremesinghe’s United National Party (UNP), the SLPP and even the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the current main opposition party.

Disappointed with all these parties he told SEP campaigners that he would vote for the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). “The policies of [JVP leader] Anura Kumara [Dissanayake] are good,” he said, but added that he had doubts about whether the JVP would implement them.

SEP campaigners explained how the JVP supported the IMF’s austerity measures and that it had been partners or supporters of almost every bourgeois government since 1994. They also reviewed its enthusiastic support for anti-Tamil racialist war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the JVP’s fascistic terror against the working class during the 1988–90 period.

Hassan carefully listened, replying that the JVP’s political record was “problematic” asked for further discussion about the SEP and its election campaign.

Referring to the SEP’s analysis of growing danger of a third imperialist war, he said: “If a war by America and NATO against Russia and China goes forward, there is the danger that the entire world would be ruined. Japanese children today still face the consequences of bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I’m for the building of an anti-war movement and mobilising youth. I will organise a discussion with other young people, especially about organising against war.

“You’ve explained that the JVP is hand in hand with American imperialists in this situation. I comprehended those facts. The JVP has a history of dealing with the capitalist governments,” he said.



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