

Sri Lankan SEP election campaign wins support from plantation workers

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party's local government election campaign in Sri Lanka has won significant support among plantation workers from Maskeliya in the Nuwaraeliya district.

Last week, in an unprecedented attack on democratic rights, President Wickremesinghe cancelled the scheduled March 9 local government elections. The government scuttled the elections, fearful that an almost certain electoral defeat of its candidates in the poll would undermine its efforts to impose International Monetary Fund austerity measures. On Friday, the Sri Lankan Election Commission met and formally announced that it was postponing the elections, with a new date to be announced on March 3.

The SEP intervened in the elections to take forward the building of an independent movement of the working class and rural toilers, based on an international socialist perspective to fight the government's social attacks and the growing danger of world war.

Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in the Nuwaraeliya district is one of three local government bodies the SEP was contesting. More than 75 percent of the district's residents are tea plantation workers.

Three of the SEP's 19 candidates for Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha are members of the Plantation Workers Action Committee (PWAC) established on the party's initiative. A. Parimaladevi, one of the SEP candidates, is from the Alton Estate. She is among 38 workers witch-hunted and sacked by management over their active role in a 47-day strike for higher wages in early 2021.

SEP and PWAC members campaigned at the Alton, Fairlawn, Glenugie, Strathspey and Gartmore estates in the Maskeliya area in the two weeks prior to Wickremesinghe's cancellation of the local government polls.

Many plantation workers denounced the Wickremesinghe government and the treacherous role of

the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the other plantation sector trade unions. Last month, CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman became a cabinet minister in Wickremesinghe's government.

A retired worker from Alton Estate, who joined SEP campaigners while visiting fellow workers' quarters, denounced the CWC for "supporting the government."

He also accused estate management for "doing nothing for our welfare." This was a reference to the fact that a non-government organisation—not management—had established a water supply facility at the estate. "We are starving because the price of goods is unbearable for us," he added, explaining that workers have still not decided who to vote for.

The government and the media are constantly attempting to cover up the consequences of the US-NATO war against Russian in Ukraine and the danger of a third world war. However, several workers explained how the ongoing conflict directly impacted on their lives.

A female worker from Norwood Fashions factory and mother of one child said that she and several other employees lost their jobs because of the war. Management had bluntly declared that "garment orders from Europe have stopped" and jobs had to be cut.

"Very few people are now working in that factory," she said. "I do agree that the war must be stopped immediately. All over the world people are suffering and are affected by the war. Petrol and diesel prices are being increased because of this conflict."

Arumugam Murugan, a worker from Alton Estate's 10th division, explained the increased exploitation imposed under the so-called Revenue Sharing System (RSS), which was partially introduced in the division nearly four years ago. Management, supported by all the trade unions, divided part of the estate, handing over sections to 45 workers. These workers were granted 1,500 tea bushes each.

“We have suffered a lot under this system,” Murugan said. “We have to do all the work involved, including tea plucking and cleaning the ground. Even though management supplies fertiliser and agri-chemicals, we do all the back-breaking work by ourselves.”

Workers have also been deprived of their rest days because they have to work in the main part of the estate, which is not under RSS, as well as in the RSS sections, he explained. Management only pays 50 rupees per kilo of tea leaves from the RSS areas, even though the regular price is usually 150 rupees.

“We are compelled to work in these [RSS] fields even on Sundays, which is supposed to be our holiday. Previously, if we worked on Sundays, we would be paid for one and-a half days, with EPF [Employee Provident Fund] and ETF [Employee Trust Fund] benefits. We’ve now lost that,” Murugan said. The SEP’s call for the formation of independent action committees of workers, he said, “is a good idea. We have to talk to other workers about this.”

S. Kristila 37, a housewife from the Deeside division of the Glenugie Estate, spoke about the rising cost of living and the inadequate salaries paid to workers. “Their wages are not even enough for their meals. They cannot even buy dried fish to add to their meals because of the high cost of living. None of the plantation unions or the political parties cares about these workers’ lives,” she said.

Referring to the capitalist politicians, she added, “They come to the estate asking for us to vote for them. They pretend that they are for improving workers’ conditions but they’re only working to improve their own comfortable lives. Your party is different. I know that because it is always supporting workers’ struggles to fight for their rights.”

Referring to CWC leader Thondaman joining Wickremesinghe’s cabinet, she said: “These people have previously taken ministerial posts but did nothing for us. Thondaman will do nothing for us this time also. Instead, he has proposed to increase water tariffs.”

M. Selvaranee, a female worker from the Strathspey Estate in Upcot, said her house had caught fire because of an electricity fault, a regular occurrence in the plantation areas. The blaze destroyed most of her home, along with valuables and clothing, and the schoolbooks of her grandchildren. She was worried that the skyrocketing cost of living would make it very difficult to recover from the fire and restore the damage.

Adding salt to her wounds, Selvaranee explained that

her daughter had been working as a housemaid in Saudi Arabia but died there from COVID-19, leaving her two children in Selvaranee’s care. The Saudi house owner did not send her outstanding salary for a whole year. Without any income to look after the orphans, Selvaranee had to resume work at the estate on a casual basis.

“We informed the agency that sent my daughter abroad about her death, but nothing happened. I approached all the trade unions and political parties, asking for their help to get my daughter’s outstanding wages from Saudi Arabia, but nobody helped us.”

M. Yohan, from Alton Estate, said he has worked at the estate for almost two years but has not yet been made permanent.

“It is very difficult to live on a wage of only 1,000 rupees per day, and to get that salary, tea plucking workers must harvest 18kg per day. I look after five children—mine and my sister’s. My sister works in the Middle East as a housemaid and she sends us 25,000 rupees per month. My wife doesn’t work. We also have to pay for the education of our children,” he said.

“The trade unions are doing nothing for workers,” he added. “This is the first time I’ve learnt about your program and I’m ready to discuss it more in the future.”

T. Selvaranee, who had to stop working at the estate for health reasons, lives in a small hut with her three children. “I’m a heart patient and find it very difficult to live in this hut, she told SEP campaigners. “We have told estate management, the trade unions, an NGO and other organisations about my plight but nobody has cared about our appeals.”

Wasanthan, 20, who works as an electrician at the estate said: “I have read your leaflet on the election and there are good things in it. I know all the parties and trade unions visit the estate during the elections. They make all sorts of promises but after they come to power none are implemented. I know that you are different. I have already started discussing with youth [in the estate] about your party.”



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