

Sri Lankan SEP election meeting in central plantation district denounces cancellation of local polls

Our correspondents

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Plantation Workers Action Committee held an open-air meeting on February 26 at the Maskeliya bus stand in the central plantation district of Nuwreliya. The meeting was part of the SEP's campaign in the previously scheduled March 9 local government elections.

The SEP is standing a slate of 53 candidates for three local government (LG) bodies—the Kolonnawa Urban Council in Colombo, the Karainagar Pradeshiya Sabha in Jaffna and the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in Nuwreliya.

Fearing a resounding defeat in the LG polls, President Ranil Wickremesinghe last month declared that there was no money to run the elections and that they were cancelled. No new date for the elections has been announced.

The meeting, which was chaired by K. Kandeepan, an SEP Central Committee member and leader of the Glenugie Plantation Workers Action Committee, denounced Wickremesinghe's anti-democratic act.

Kandeepan told the meeting that Wickremesinghe's decision had nothing to do with a lack of election fund money. Instead, it was part of a broader attack on the democratic and social rights of workers, young people and the rural toilers.

The speaker reviewed the severe social conditions now confronting plantation workers: "Plantation workers' poverty-level wages now mean that they face difficulties even getting just one healthy meal per day."

Kandeepan explained how the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the other plantation unions were supporting the government and the plantation companies. "This is why workers need to form action committees, independent of the trade unions, at every estate and workplace in order to fight for their rights," he said.

The next speaker was SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah, who is leading the party's slate of candidates for the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in Nuwreliya.

"Although the results of these local polls will not change the government, the outcome will deepen its political instability and encourage workers and the oppressed masses to revolt against the government. That's the real reason the government

doesn't want to hold the elections," he said.

"Any future Sri Lankan government—whether led by the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya of Sajith Premadasa or the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led National People's Power of Anurakumara Dissanayake—will implement the harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

"There is no solution to the burning issues confronting workers, youth and the rural toilers under the profit-driven capitalist system. Workers and the oppressed masses need to fight for a government of workers and farmers committed to socialist policies," Thevarajah said, explaining that the SEP is the only party fighting to mobilise the working class on that perspective.

SEP candidate A. Parimaladevi, a plantation worker from Alton Estate in Upcot and a member of the Alton Estate Workers Action Committee, also addressed the meeting. She was one of 38 workers victimised by the estate management for their involvement in a strike for higher wages in February 2021.

"When I and 37 other workers from Alton Estate were witch-hunted by management and the police, including a court case on false charges that we assaulted the manager and damaged his bungalow, the SEP was the only party that came forward to defend us," she explained.

"Our action committee and the SEP initiated a campaign demanding our reinstatement and the withdrawal of all the charges against us. All workers must support this struggle," Parimaladevi said.

The last speaker was SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena. He began by presenting a brief account of the SEP's principled history.

"The SEP's predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, was founded in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist party.

"This was a principled response to the great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party which joined a coalition with Sirima Bandaranayake's capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party in 1964. The RCL/SEP has fought relentlessly for more than half a

century for the political independence of the working class,” he said.

Wijesiriwardena pointed out that the SEP was the only organisation running in the local elections that has fought throughout its history to unite the Sinhala and Tamil speaking workers on an international socialist program.

He continued: “This meeting is being held at a very important turning point in Sri Lankan politics. On one side, the Wickremesinghe government has unleashed an unprecedented attack on the social and democratic rights of the workers and the oppressed masses. On the other side, millions of workers are continuously entering into struggle against those attacks.”

Wijesiriwardena pointed out that the economic meltdown in Sri Lanka was part of an escalating international crisis of capitalism, which has been deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

“Wickremesinghe calculates that his government, which is deeply hated by the people, will suffer a humiliating defeat in the local elections, further deepening the country’s political instability and making it difficult to implement the IMF austerity policies. This is what is behind his moves to cancel the local government elections.”

The government and the entire ruling class fear that the rising struggles of the working class will develop into the sort of mass uprising that ousted President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government last year, the speaker continued.

“Wickremesinghe’s repeated vows that the ‘country will never be allowed to fall into anarchy,’ means that he will try to crush these rising struggles by using the entire state power, including the police, the military and all the anti-democratic laws,” he explained.

Wijesiriwardena said that an independent political movement of the working class is needed to fight the government’s brutal social measures, aimed at placing the burden of the crisis on workers and the oppressed masses. “This movement,” he continued, “must rally the rural poor and launch a political counter offensive against the Wickremesinghe government and capitalist rule, based on international socialism.”

Wijesiriwardena said the trade unions and pseudo-left parties, such as Frontline Socialist Party, were hostile to this program. He then reviewed the treacherous role being played by the CWC, the largest plantation trade union, and Jeevan Thondaman its leader. He explained that Thondaman, who was a cabinet minister in the Wickremesinghe government, was a direct participant in the social assault on plantation workers and the working class as a whole.

“Millions of workers participated in the uprising and demonstrated their enormous social power by ousting the former president and his government. But because the uprising was not based on a revolutionary socialist perspective, it ultimately failed to achieve the desired goals of the masses.”

Wijesiriwardena quoted from the SEP’s statement, issued

during last year’s uprising, which called for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and the Rural Masses:

“The foundations for the Democratic and Socialist Congress need to be laid by the workers and rural toilers themselves, through the establishment of action committees in workplaces, factories, plantations, neighborhoods and rural areas throughout the island to fight for their class interests. If these committees are to give genuine voice to the aspirations of working people, it is essential that they be independent of all the parties of the capitalist class and its trade union flunkies.”

SEP and plantation action committee members campaigned for several weeks in the estates around Upcot and in Maskeliya town to build last month’s open-air meeting. Thousands of copies of the SEP statement denouncing the cancellation of the elections were distributed, along with plantation action committee statement fighting the witch hunt of the Alton Estate workers.

After the meeting, one worker from Maskeliya estate said: “I agreed with what speakers said about the difficulties we face. When I went to hospital, all they gave me was a prescription to buy medicine outside. When we send our children to school, the school asks for money for everything. How can we live in this situation? We expect a solution from your party. I carefully noted the speech of the final speaker and I want to talk to him about our problems.”

Another worker from the Lanka estate in Maskeliya bought a copy of the SEP’s statement calling for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses. “I’ve never heard of this type of detailed explanation of the economic and political situation in Sri Lanka and world,” he said.



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