

Sri Lankan SEP wins strong support for its campaign against government austerity and privatisation measures

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) campaign against the Wickremesinghe government's plans to privatise hundreds of state-owned enterprises as demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) continues to win enthusiastic backing from public and private sector workers.

The SEP is holding a public meeting at 4 p.m. on July 6, at the Public Library Auditorium in Colombo to take forward this campaign. Campaigners have distributed hundreds of copies of Sinhala- and Tamil-language versions of the party's statement, "Oppose Sri Lankan government's privatisation of state enterprises! Build workers' action committees to fight for jobs and wages!"

Several tea plantation workers interrupted their demanding work schedules to speak with SEP campaigners. Plantation workers are among the most oppressed layers of the Sri Lankan working class, subjected to slave labour conditions and below-poverty wages for decades.

Our campaigners visited the Alton Estate, at Up-Cot in Maskeliya where a group of plantation workers, with political support from the SEP, established the Alton Workers Action Committee (AWAC) during the plantation workers' nationwide strike action for higher wages in February 2021.

Alton management and the police responded by launching a joint witch hunt against militant workers who played a central role in the strike at the estate that lasted 47 days. Management sacked 38 of these workers, after initiating a frame-up case against 22 of them and two youth from the estate.

Related court proceedings over management's bogus charges are still dragging on at the Hatton Magistrate's Court. The SEP and the AWAC are the only organisations conducting a campaign to defend the victimised workers, expose the frame-up charges and demand their immediate withdrawal and the full reinstatement of the workers.

Lingam, whose wife is one of 38 victimised estate workers, said he agreed with the SEP's fight against privatisation. Privatisation of 430 state-owned enterprises (SOEs) would be "a disaster for the people," he said, and referred to the government's move to establish paying wards in public hospitals.

"If this system is introduced, then the poorest people, including plantation workers, will die. My son has suffered from a nerve disease since his childhood, which means that every month we must travel to Kandy Hospital, 45 kilometres from here," Lingam said.

"We cannot travel by bus because of my son's bad health and so we have to hire a three-wheeler, paying 7,000 rupees for each trip. I can't imagine the scenarios when health service is being privatised! We're barely able to manage things at present because of the skyrocketing cost of living but if gets worse we'll be compelled to stop going to the clinic," he said.

Everyone should independently unite and oppose the government's austerity measures, he continued, because all of the parliamentary political parties and the trade unions support those austerity measures. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union, he said, was joining hands with the other parties that support IMF policies.

Lingam thanked campaigners and said, the SEP "is the only party that formed an action committee in our estate and is fighting to reinstate 38 workers who were sacked from their jobs and to withdraw their court cases."

Param, a news reporter from Hatton, said privatisation is "dangerous" for workers. "I agreed with the SEP's assessment that only a workers' and farmers' government can stop privatisation. The introduction of the revenue sharing system [in plantations] is part of this privatisation program," he said.

Param suggested, "All socialists, including your party joined together and participated in the mass movement that forced President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to leave the presidency. This was a success and so why can't all socialists join together and fight for a socialist government?"

Campaigners discussed this issue with Param, explaining that apart from the SEP, all the other parties in Sri Lanka claiming to be socialists, including the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), have nothing to do with socialism. They also pointed out that the SEP had not collaborated with those organisations during last year's popular uprising against the government.

The mass uprising of workers, youths and rural poor succeeded in ousting the Rajapakse government, SEP campaigners explained. But Wickremesinghe was able to come to power and begin implementing the IMF-dictated austerity measures because the popular uprising was diverted by the trade unions, supported by the FSP, into the campaign for an interim government.

This political trap—for an alternative bourgeois government—campaigners explained, was promoted by opposition parties like the Samagi Jana Balwegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna pointing out that SEP alone fought to mobilise the working class independently on a socialist program and perspective during last year's mass uprising.

SEP campaigners also spoke with workers outside the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) office in Ratmalana, an outer suburb of Colombo.

The NWSDB is one the major SOEs targeted for privatisation. While water rates were increased last September, Deputy General Manager N.K. Ranatunga recently announced that the board had to bear additional costs due to the increase in electricity charges and that even higher increases are being prepared.

Most of the workers who spoke to SEP campaigners said they have been “kept in the dark” about privatisation, not just by the management but also by the trade unions. They said that the unions operating at NWSDB were affiliated to various political parties and none has prepared or initiated any campaign against privatisation.

Ranjan said: “Life has become difficult because we’re not being paid overtime. Eighty projects have been stopped during the last two years. Now there’s only two projects here, hence no overtime. Because of that there’s no new reservoirs, no new intakes to enhance water capacity, no pipe laying and so new water connections have been suspended. The previous target of 500,000 new connections by 2025 has been stopped.

“Since the eruption of the coronavirus in 2020 there’s been no new recruitment to our working cadre. Almost 3,000 staff have retired but there have been no new recruits, so when management is faced with these burning shortages, it hires [contract workers] from manpower agencies but on very low wages.

“When electricity charges and fuel prices are increased, NWSDB is affected and the board is supposed to pay for this from its revenue under conditions where Treasury has cut money for all social services, including health and education. They increased the water bills by 60 percent in September but we weren’t given any concessions on our water bills. We need to organise to fight against these conditions,” Ranjan said.

Another NWSDB worker said: “The unions are no use for workers because they are carrying out management requirements, not ours. We can’t depend on the unions to fight against privatisation.”

After listening to SEP campaigners explain the need for

workers to establish independent action committees to fight against the privatisation and other austerity attacks, the NWSDB worker said: “I agree that workers need a separate organisation, but it must be a strong one, otherwise the union bureaucracy will intimidate us.”

A worker overseeing cleaning staff at the NWSDB office said: “Living is becoming more and more difficult every day. Cleaning has been contracted to an outside company with their workers only paid 950 rupees [\$US3.10] per day. This is totally inadequate for just one person to live on, let alone to maintain a family.”

The campaign team also visited a nearby housing area where NWSDB workers live. The area, which has about 20 homes, almost seems abandoned with many of the buildings uninhabited or badly needing repair.

An engineering assistant living there spoke with the campaign team. “The board is not replacing retiring workers and hence our workload increases day by day,” he said.

“They have resorted to recruiting manual workers from manpower companies on a contract basis. These workers have no labour rights and get only 150 rupees [\$US 0.50] per hour for overtime,” he said and explained some of the hardships they faced.

“Professionally qualified workers are thinking about migration. Around six workers in this neighborhood have already migrated, mainly to Australia, Canada and the UK. I’m even now also looking at that option,” he said.

When the team explained that rising inflation was drastically impacting on workers around the world, including in Australia, he readily agreed. “Yes, I am aware of that even in those countries workers will not get a good life, but I feel that is the only option available,” he responded, adding that he would read the statement and continue the discussion with the SEP.

Bhashitha spoke with the campaign team. He recently graduated from the Ceylon German Technical Training Institute and is now employed in the NWSDB workshop. “Around 20 of us were recruited to NWSDB less than a year ago. However, I am aware that privatisation issues are coming up. They have stopped recruitment and now there’s talk inside that workforce numbers are going to be reduced to 5,000,” he said.

Bhashitha carefully listened as the team explained how and why workers needed to organise their own independent action committees. “We were not yet confirmed in our positions and there are some risks, but I will try and share your statement,” he said.



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