

Sri Lankan workers enthusiastically support SEP's party development campaign

Our reporters
12 May 2024

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka continues its ambitious Party Development Campaign this month, winning support from workers and young people in several major towns and cities.

On May 7, SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members campaigned outside Gampaha railway station with a book table and a Sinhala and Tamil banner that read "Defeat the government's effort to sideline workers' parties from elections." Gampaha is the sixth largest urban area in Sri Lanka's Western Province with thousands of commuters using the railway station each day.

Last month, President Ranil Wickremesinghe government cabinet decided to massively increase the deposits required for candidates contesting elections under a registered party or independent status in future elections. For instance, in the next presidential election, which is due in September or October, the deposit for a candidate from a registered party has been increased 52-fold, from 50,000 rupees to 2.6 million rupees (\$US8,667), and the deposit for an independent candidate rising from 75,000 to 3.1 million rupees.

The aim of this anti-democratic measure is to limit voters' choice to candidates from rich capitalist parties whilst marginalising other parties, including the Socialist Equality Party.

SEP members have distributed thousands of copies of the party's April 15 statement "Sri Lankan government announces unprecedented anti-democratic restrictions on election candidates" as the basis of their campaign. The SEP has also issued another statement, "The SEP (Sri Lanka) launches party development fund to expand its political work."

People have eagerly participated in discussions with SEP and IYSSE campaigners with almost everyone denouncing the government's attempts to block independent and socialist candidates from participating in

the elections.

"This is a blatant attack on democratic rights," said Tissa, a postal worker from Ragama, adding: "It's clear the government wants to sideline and remove left-wing candidates and parties from the elections. That way only capitalist parties will decide everything and then plunder the country in the way that they want."

He angrily added: "This government hasn't any mercy for the people and is attacking working people and the oppressed on all fronts. We can't survive on the meagre salaries we get because the cost of consumer goods is skyrocketing."

Tissa agreed with the SEP's call for the repudiation of all foreign debt, saying, "Where has this money that was borrowed by our various governments gone and why should workers and the poor pay their debts? If we have to keep paying these loans, then our children won't even be able to think about their future."

Tissa took several copies of the SEP statement to distribute among his fellow postal workers.

Niresh, a small businessman in Gampaha, agreed that the government's massive increase in election deposits was an anti-democratic attack and also criticised the opportunist politics of the opposition Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its National People's Power (NPP).

"I can't see any differences between the JVP/NPP and other capitalist parties," he said, mentioning the JVP's previous efforts to bring various capitalist governments and presidents to power.

"[In the 1990s] the JVP asked people to vote for Chandrika [Kumaratunga], then they asked us to vote for Mahinda [Rajapakse], then backed [Maithripala] Sirisena, and now they've said that all those politicians were thieves and that they [the JVP/NPP] are good people. Do they think people are fools? This is ridiculous," he said.

Denouncing the Israeli genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, Niresh said, "Israel deliberately allowed the Hamas

militants to penetrate Israel and carry out the October 7 attack. They did this with the aim of creating world opinion to justify Israel's unprecedented crimes against the Gazans." He called on people around the world to oppose Israel's illegal and brutal war.

On May 6, another SEP team established a literature table near the Khan Clock Tower outside Colombo Port. Many workers, including port employees, pass by this busy location. Several people held discussions with party campaigners and were very interested in the SEP literature with the sale of books and donations for the party development fund totalling 3,500 rupees.

One worker from a private company in Colombo Port responded to the SEP campaign and, after being told about mammoth increases in election deposits for candidates, said: "The government knows it cannot win the elections and that's why they've done this."

Parties such as the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and the NPP, he said, will not be affected by this move. "They can pay. They have people to pay for them and so this increase will affect small parties," he said, and donated to the party building fund.

While the worker said that the working class should bring a socialist government to power and ensure equal opportunities for everyone, he wondered whether an NPP/JVP government could solve the problems facing workers and youth. SEP members explained that the NPP/JVP was a capitalist party and committed to the International Monetary Fund's austerity program.

SEP campaigners spoke with a physiotherapist from a government hospital in Kandy who happened to be visiting Colombo. He said that medical professionals in government hospitals were under tremendous pressure with too few staff and high workloads. "The government does not want to recruit new hands," he added.

Commenting on Sri Lanka's ongoing political and economic crisis, the physiotherapist said that all parliamentary parties should be held responsible for this situation.

"All these parties should be defeated at the elections and, according to the world tradition, the working class must intervene to solve these problems. I believe you are playing a big role in building this working-class party," he said. The physiotherapist purchased several SEP books and donated to the party's campaign fund, saying, "I need to get your books so I can explain this to others."

Last month SEP members campaigned at the Ceylon Government Railway flats in Dematagoda, Colombo, where they met a retired railway worker who had worked

for the railways for 31 years. He condemned the increase in election deposits saying, "This was done for their own advantages and to increase their [political] power."

This will impact on the working-class parties, he declared, warning, "I think that in the future the government will try and fully disband these parties. They are going to suppress [the workers' movement] because they fear that the workers would rise again," a reference to the mass uprising that brought down former President Gotabaya and his government in 2022.

The retired railway worker voiced his regret for having supported various capitalist political parties, including the Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP) of then President Rajapakse.

"I now realise [the truth] about this and don't support any of these parties," he said, and explained the desperate poverty now facing workers and the poor. "This situation should be totally changed," he added, also recalling the treacherous role of the JVP and warning that they could not be trusted.

SEP campaigners explained the class character of the JVP and its pro-capitalist support for IMF austerity. The former railway worker said: "Now I realise what they are doing. They meet ambassadors and [foreign] diplomats, and their leader [Dissanayake] has been to various countries, but he doesn't explain things clearly. No one tells the truth."

After further discussion about the history of the SEP and the Trotskyist program of the International Committee of the Fourth International, he replied, "What we need is a movement, which rises from below and is dedicated to the people and does not surrender to privileges. The program that you've explained must become successful and I wish you all the best."



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