

SEP (Sri Lanka) presidential candidate holds Colombo press conference

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) began its presidential election campaign on August 8 with a press conference at the National Library in Colombo. SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekera chaired the event, which was addressed by Pani Wijesiriwardena, the SEP's presidential candidate. The election is scheduled to be held on September 21.

The press conference was attended by reporters from several television channels, including *Sirasa*, the state-owned *ITN*, *Gagana* and Tamil-language channels *IBC* and *LankaSri*, and two leading Tamil newspapers—*Veerakesari* and *Thamilan*. Most of the media outlets participating prominently reported the SEP's candidacy in their main news that day.

Jayasekera introduced Wijesiriwardena as a longtime SEP political committee member, noting his almost 50-year record of fighting for the interests of the working class and oppressed masses, including as a leading member of the Revolutionary Communist League, the SEP's predecessor. Wijesiriwardena is a retired teacher who is well known among teachers and workers for his principled struggle for their democratic and social rights.

"In opposition to all the bourgeois parties, such as President Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna of the former President Mahinda Rajapakse, the Samagi Jana Balavegaya and the National People's Power (NPP), the electoral front of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and various Tamil and Muslim parties, the SEP fights for the independent mobilisation of the working class rallying the rural poor. Our aim in this mobilisation is to lead the fight for international socialism against war, austerity and dictatorship," Jayasekera said.

The SEP will also intensify its struggle against the pseudo-left hangers on of the ruling class such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and their trade union appendages, exposing their pro-capitalist and anti-working-class politics, Jayasekera explained.

Addressing the conference, Wijesiriwardena explained how the SEP differs from all other parties and candidates

contesting the election.

"All the candidates of the main capitalist parties—from President Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the United National Party, but who is contesting as an 'independent' candidate, to SJB (Samagi Jana Balavegaya) leader Sajith Premadasa and NPP/JVP leader Anura Kumara Disanayake—are running in this election to defend the profit interests of big business.

"If they come to power, their aim is to push forward the austerity of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) even more rapidly and to crush the growing class struggles against it in the most brutal way," Wijesiriwardena said.

He explained how the pseudo-left parties like the FSP seek to trap workers within the existing parliamentary framework and the capitalist system.

"The FSP has launched the People's Struggle Alliance for the election, which includes other fake-left organisations such as a new Pabloite group, known as the Socialist People's Forum, and the Maoist New Democratic Marxist-Leninist Party. It claims that the rights of the workers and other oppressed layers can be secured by forming 'People's Councils' and 'putting pressure on parliament,'" he said.

All the capitalist parties and pseudo-left organisations running in the presidential elections directly defend the capitalist system, he continued, pointing out that the SEP was the only party fighting for the independent mobilisation of the working class and rallying the oppressed masses against the capitalist profit system.

Referring to the popular uprising in 2022 that brought down former President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government, Wijesiriwardena explained how the FSP and the trade union leaderships disoriented the mass movement and diverted it behind the demands for an interim government advanced by the SJB and JVP. "This is why Wickremesinghe, a long-time ally of US imperialism and enforcer of IMF dictates, was able to ascend to the presidency," he said.

Wijesiriwardena said the failure of the mass upsurge highlighted the necessity for the development of a mass

revolutionary party based on a socialist perspective and capable of leading the working class and the oppressed masses. The SEP advocates the formation of Action Committees of the working class and among the rural masses in every workplace, factory and neighbourhood to prepare a counter-attack against the social onslaught by the ruling class.

“The SEP calls for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of workers and the rural masses based on delegates from these Action Committees to pave the way for a workers’ and peasants’ government in the form of a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic, as a part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally,” Wijesiriwardena said.

The SEP presidential candidate said that the party would utilise the election campaign to make workers aware of the Israeli genocide against the Palestinians, which now threatens to engulf the entire Middle East in war. The SEP will also explain that the ongoing US-led NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the escalating war preparations against China, with New Delhi as its main military partner in South Asia, were dragging humanity towards a global nuclear war, he said.

“The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Trotskyist world party of socialist revolution. Our movement is fighting to build an international anti-war movement based on the working class and the fight for socialism against the war,” Wijesiriwardena said.

An ITN reporter asked what was meant by the term “Eelam” in the SEP’s call for a “Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka-Eelam.” [Eelam is the Tamil term for Sri Lanka.]

Wijesiriwardena explained: “Our call for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka-Eelam is based on the principles of the Marxist movement and its historical experiences. The SEP totally opposes all political programs and organisations that protect the Sinhala-Buddhist unitary state of Sri Lanka established under so-called independence in 1948.

“Based on the theory of permanent revolution developed by Leon Trotsky, who was co-leader of the Russian Revolution with Lenin in 1917, we firmly assert that the ruling classes in countries like Sri Lanka with belated capitalist development, are incapable of addressing or resolving basic democratic questions.

“The Sri Lankan ruling class has used anti-Tamil discrimination, which culminated in the bloody 26-year long war, to divide the working class. This is exposed not only in Sri Lanka but across South Asia, in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As Trotsky pointed out, the working class is the only class that can protect democratic rights including the democratic rights of the oppressed minorities in these

countries,” he said.

“We also oppose the Tamil nationalism and separatism advocated by the Tamil elite and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The Tamil parties seek privileges for their elites and to advance their interests. Our program is to unite the workers across ethnic lines to fight for socialism, which is the only way to win democratic rights. That is why we call for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally,” Wijesiriwardena said.

The same reporter asked Wijesiriwardena whether the presence of many candidates and large ballot papers would result in some candidates only winning a thousand votes or serving as the appendages of the major parties.

“The point you make regarding the length of the ballot paper is an opinion that is being promoted by the government and other capitalist parties,” Wijesiriwardena said. “Cabinet recently passed a proposal imposing phenomenal increases in the costs of deposits for candidates running in presidential and other elections.

“This anti-democratic proposal was bound up with other long-standing measures that trample on the rights of small parties like the SEP—a working-class party—to present their policies in elections, and the right of the public to know about them.

“Reactionary arguments claiming that the size of the ballot paper and the increase in the number of candidates will trouble the voter and increase the cost of running the elections is a cover up for this government’s anti-democratic actions. We oppose the government’s move to restrict the elections to the parties that represent the wealthy,” Wijesiriwardena said.

The SEP is holding its first presidential election meeting at the Colombo Public Library Auditorium on August 16 at 4 p.m. Wijesiriwardena and other party speakers will fully detail the SEP’s program at this meeting and answer questions on all aspects of the party’s socialist and internationalist perspective.



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