

SEP stands in Sri Lankan presidential election to fight for a socialist program

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is contesting the presidential election scheduled for September 21 to advance a socialist alternative to imperialist war and the deepening attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

Our candidate, Pani Wijesiriwardena, is a longstanding party leader who also contested the presidential elections in 2015 and 2019. He has a five-decade history of fighting for the interests of the working class. A retired teacher, his principled struggle against the attacks on the rights of workers and the oppressed masses, including on free education, has earned him considerable respect among teachers and students.

In opposition to all the parties of the political establishment, we alone tell the truth to workers, youth and poor: the immediate issues confronting them—worsening poverty, unemployment and other social crises—cannot be solved within the framework of capitalism and the nation state.

The SEP will use the election to explain the necessity of workers taking matters into their own hands and forming Action Committees, independent of the capitalist parties and their trade unions, to fight for their interests. That is the basis for developing a unified movement in Sri Lanka and internationally to abolish capitalism and reorganise society along socialist lines to meet pressing social needs and put an end to the looming disasters facing humanity.

The global crisis of capitalism

The presidential election has been called amid an unprecedented economic and political crisis of bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka, which is part and parcel of the greatest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s. The Sri Lankan government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, like its counterparts around the world, is placing the full burden on workers, youth and rural poor, by imposing—to the letter—the diktats of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The SEP and its sister parties of the international Trotskyist movement, the ICFI, are alone in warning of the rapidly rising danger of world war, which is already emerging on three fronts and threatening humanity with a nuclear holocaust.

The US-NATO powers are engaged in the third year of an escalating war against Russia in Ukraine and now planning for their own direct involvement. In the Middle East, the same imperialist powers are backing the fascist Israeli regime's genocide in Gaza and its criminal provocations aimed at triggering a devastating regional war, targeting Iran above all. These conflicts are regarded in Washington as the necessary preparations for opening a third front against China, which US imperialism regards as the chief threat to its global domination.

Neither the government nor any of the opposition parties has opposed the criminal wars of US imperialism and its allies. In fact, President Wickremesinghe, a longstanding US stooge, has increasingly integrated Sri Lanka into the US-led war drive against China by opening up the strategically-placed island to American military forces.

The SEP will campaign in the presidential election for the building of an

anti-war movement in Sri Lanka and South Asia as part of the fight by the ICFI to build a unified international movement of the working class against war to put an end to capitalism—the root cause of war.

It is a delusion to believe that imperialism will draw back from nuclear war. The huge death toll of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that mass death is being normalised in the pursuit of corporate profit and national interests.

Now in its fifth year, the pandemic has already claimed more than 28 million lives globally as governments around the world have completely abandoned any, even limited, mitigation measures.

The SEP and the ICFI insist on the urgency of the international working class fighting for global eradication of COVID as the only means of halting the mounting toll of deaths and debilitating long-COVID.

The 2022 mass uprising in Sri Lanka

The global crisis of capitalism found its acute expression in Sri Lanka following the default on its foreign debt repayments in 2022. This sent prices skyrocketing, created critical shortages of food, medicines and fuel, and triggered a mass uprising against the government—part of the international upsurge of the class struggle.

The SEP will campaign in the presidential election to draw the necessary political lessons for workers from the failure of the 2022 uprising to alleviate the worsening social crisis that continues to press down on working people.

The outpouring of the masses onto the streets of Colombo and other cities, which included two national strikes of millions of workers and defied threats of repression, demonstrated the power of the working class. President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was compelled to flee the country and resign.

However, lacking a political party and program that represented its interests, the question of what was to replace the Rajapakse regime was left in the hands of the defenders of capitalism—the parliamentary parties, their trade unions and fake lefts such as the Frontline Socialist Party. The result was the anti-democratic installation of Wickremesinghe as president, who has over the past two years ruthlessly imposed the IMF's austerity demands and resorted to police-state methods to block and suppress any opposition.

Time and again, workers have responded to Wickremesinghe's assault on jobs, wages, working conditions and essential services, such as health and education, with strikes and protests. But the trade unions have deliberately kept the growing opposition divided, limited in scope and confined to futile appeals to the government to make concessions.

Wickremesinghe has flatly declared that there is no money for wage increases or to maintain basic services and that the destruction of jobs and the fire-sale of state-owned enterprises must proceed. He has used the Essential Services Act to ban strikes and deployed the military and police against workers, youth and the urban and rural poor.

Neither the opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—nor the trade unions have waged a

concerted campaign to challenge Wickremesinghe. They all agree that there is no alternative to the IMF's demand that the working class must pay for the economic crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism. The political establishment as a whole is terrified of the re-eruption of opposition on an even wider scale than in 2022, directly threatening bourgeois rule.

No-one should believe the false election promises of the opposition parties. The SJB and JVP, along with the JVP's electoral front, the National Peoples Power (NPP), were instrumental in crippling the 2022 uprising politically by confining it to the parliamentary arena.

The SJB, like the right-wing United National Party of Wickremesinghe from which it emerged, is just as fully committed to imposing the IMF's program as Wickremesinghe. Indeed, in 2022, the SJB leaders criticised Rajapakse for delaying going, begging bowl in hand, to the IMF.

The JVP is intent on thrusting itself forward as a reliable defender of bourgeois rule. Its leaders have repeatedly declared their support for the IMF agenda and called off all strikes and protests prior to the election to demonstrate to the ruling class their ability to suppress the opposition of working people. JVP leaders have held closed-door meetings with US diplomats, indicating their willingness to align with American imperialism and its wars.

None of the Tamil parties, including the various plantation unions, represents the slightest opposition to war, austerity and police-state measures. They speak for the interests of the venal Tamil bourgeoisie, whose sole concern is to cut a deal with one or other of the major parties for a power-sharing arrangement to enhance their ability to exploit the Tamil working class.

Whoever wins the presidency and forms the next government will toe the IMF line and intensify the assault on the basic social and democratic rights of the working class and oppressed masses. At the same time, in one way or another, Sri Lanka will inexorably be drawn into the vortex of the emerging global war.

For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses

It was not inevitable that the 2022 uprising should end in the coming to power of the Wickremesinghe regime. In the course of that political upheaval, the SEP elaborated and fought for a socialist perspective that provided a road forward for the masses. In opposition to the sordid manoeuvres of the establishment parties, we called for an island-wide campaign by working people and youth for the organisation and convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses.

In a statement published in July 2022, the SEP rejected any participation in an all-party interim government, which was being promoted by the opposition parties, trade unions and fake lefts of the FSP as a solution to the social catastrophe confronting working people. We warned that it would be "an instrument for the ruling class to buy time while it prepares a devastating onslaught on the social and democratic rights of the working class."

The SEP also opposed the call by the FSP for building "a power outside" parliament by creating "people's councils." These so-called people's councils are not independent bodies through which working people can fight for their rights, but rather instruments for keeping any opposition tied to capitalist parties. The FSP and its allies insist that all the masses can do is pressure the next government for concessions.

The working class has to strike out on its own independent path. As our 2022 statement declared: "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."

A workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies

The fight for this program and perspective takes on a burning urgency today. The SEP will utilise the election campaign to popularise the call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress and assist in building an island-wide network of Action Committees to unite the working class and lay the basis for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

To that end, the SEP advocates the following demands:

- * No to the IMF austerity! Repudiate all foreign debts!

- * Nationalise the banks, big companies and plantations under the democratic control of workers!

- * Restore and expand all subsidies and social programs for rural farmers and the needy!

- * Cancel all the debts of poor farmers, small fishermen and small businessmen!

- * Oppose all forms of nationalism and communalism, including the Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism of the Colombo establishment and the Tamil nationalism of the Tamil bourgeoisie. To fight for their class interests, workers must be united.

The political struggle for these demands poses the necessity of the working class to mobilise the rural masses and seize power. What is needed is the complete reorganisation of economic life along socialist lines to meet pressing human needs, not the profits of the super wealthy.

The fight for socialism against war, social inequality and dictatorship requires forging a unified international struggle by workers to abolish capitalism. Workers throughout South Asia and around the world, including the imperialist centres in the US and Europe, confront a similar assault on their social and democratic rights. Action committees of Sri Lankan workers need to join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), initiated by the ICFI to unite workers in a common struggle against capitalism.

The SEP will use the election campaign to educate and prepare workers and young people to undertake these revolutionary tasks. We urge all workers, students, rural masses and progressive-minded intellectuals to support and participate in the SEP election campaign, vote for our candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena, who is contesting under the symbol of a pair of scissors, and apply to join the SEP.

Above all, the key lesson of the 2022 uprising is the necessity of a mass revolutionary party to lead the political struggle against the ruling class and all its political servants. The SEP will use the election campaign to build the party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, to provide political leadership in the struggles ahead.



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