

Sri Lanka: SEP presidential candidate speaks to media, public meetings

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3 September 2024

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka is campaigning widely for the presidential election which will be held on September 21, holding discussions with significant layers of workers and young people.

The SEP is standing Pani Wijesiriwardena, a longstanding and leading party member, as its presidential candidate. Over the past two weeks, he has addressed public meetings in Colombo, Jaffna, in the war-ravaged northern province, Hatton, in the central tea plantation district and Matara in the south.

The SEP campaign has received a strong response in all these areas, including from Tamil people in northern Jaffna. The party has built an important base of support among the country's Tamil minority because it alone consistently opposed the 26 year-long anti-Tamil war by successive governments and fights against all forms of communal discrimination.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the volatile political situation, Wijesiriwardena said: "As election day nears, a hysterical campaign has been intensified by the main capitalist party candidates. They are making promises galore to hoodwink the masses and grab their votes.

"President Ranil Wickremesinghe has been implementing austerity measures ordered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), imposing various tax increases, moves towards privatisation and the slashing of welfare programs. Wickremesinghe refused any wage increase for public servants and unleashed police to ruthlessly break up their protests.

"Now, amid the election that he is contesting, Wickremesinghe has declared that he will cut the onerous pay-as you earn (PAYE) tax and institute a 25,000-rupee wage increase for public employees, of course, after October!

"Sajith Premadasa, the leader of the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), and Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who heads the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led National People's Power front, have also made empty promises. The name of Dissanayake's election manifesto is 'Rich People!

Beautiful Country!'

"These promises, straight from cloud cuckoo land, are blatant lies. All these parties are committed to the IMF's austerity program.

"This election comes just two years after the April-July 2022 popular uprising. Not a single issue that led to the uprising was solved. Poverty, unemployment, the cost-of-living crisis and other problems have worsened. The attack on democratic rights has been intensified."

Wijesiriwardena said that the false promises by these parties reflected their nervousness over brewing mass anger at the wretched social conditions they have created.

In addition, all of the capitalist candidates, as well as those of the fake-left such as the Frontline Socialist Party, are completely silent about the growing threat of a third world war.

"Only our party is telling the truth to the working people and youth. We are insisting there is no solution within the capitalist system and no national solution."

Members of SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have distributed tens of thousands of copies of Wijesiriwardena's election statement in the Tamil and Sinhala languages.

SEP campaigners have held discussions with many thoughtful people about the main issues raised in the statement including the threat of nuclear world war and fascism, growing social inequality and the need for a socialist alternative against IMF austerity.

Wijesiriwardena addressed a meeting organised by the Collective of Action Committees on August 14 to oppose the privatisation of the Ceylon Electricity Board, Telecom and Insurance Corporation. These are among the major state-owned enterprises that are being restructured as a first step towards privatisation.

He explained how the trade unions blocked the workers' struggle to defend their jobs and wages against privatisation.

During the 2022 mass uprising in Sri Lanka, the SEP put forward a socialist program against the capitalist "interim

government” proposal brought forward by all the capitalist parties and the pseudo-left. Recalling the SEP’s struggle to mobilise the working class independently during the uprising, Wijesiriwardena said, “We insisted that workers and oppressed people must build independent action committees. On the basis of delegates we should call a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses.

“We are continuing to campaign for this program and to build this Congress because it is the platform to discuss how to organise the fight for the defence of workers’ interests.

“Our party will fight in this Congress to mobilise workers in alliance with the rural masses in the struggle for socialist policies and the bringing to power of a workers’ and peasant government through the overthrow of the capitalist system.”

The SEP candidate has also received media opportunities to explain the party’s program.

Wijesiriwardena and SEP general secretary Deepal Jayasekera participated in a one-hour interview on the state-owned ITN television network on August 17. They explained the party’s origin and its political struggle in the discussion, which has received thousands of views across multiple platforms.

Answering a question from the moderators about the party’s history, Jayasekera provided a summary of the historical and international foundations of the SEP as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

He explained that a Pabloite revisionist tendency had emerged in the Fourth International in the early 1950s, adapting to the Stalinist bureaucracy and national bourgeois tendencies in the backward countries. The Trotskyists broke from this revisionist tendency and formed the ICFI. The Pabloite revisionist tendency paved the way for the 1964 great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which abandoned a socialist and internationalist program and entered the bourgeois government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike. The Revolutionary Communist League, the predecessor of the SEP, was formed by a layer of youth on the basis of the ICFI’s struggle against this betrayal.

The SEP leaders said that today’s burning issues were the drive towards a third world war by the imperialist powers including the US, social inequality, unemployment and disastrous pandemics like COVID-19.

Jayasekera said, “We insist these problems can be resolved only through the independent mobilisation of the working class internationally by taking power into its hands through overcoming the capitalist system globally....”

Another private TV channel *Siyatha* interviewed Wijesiriwardena for nearly two hours on their popular

“Turning Point” talk show program on August 27. The SEP candidate was able to provide lengthy explanations to a number of questions including about the origins of the party, the ICFI, Trotskyism, the pseudo-left organisations and the Fourth International’s Transitional Program. The discussion has received thousands of views on the *Siyatha* YouTube channel and the SEP Facebook page where it was livestreamed.

A number of viewers made favourable comments. One wrote, “This explanation of the necessity for a revolutionary party must be appreciated.”

Another leading television channel *Sirasa TV* interviewed Wijesiriwardena for half an hour on a program which has also received thousands of views.

The print media, particularly Tamil, has also reported on the SEP election campaign covering its press conferences and other meetings. The *Morning*, the leading English daily, published a lengthy interview with Wijesiriwardena.

Responding to an interview given by the SEP candidate to a national newspaper which was shared on the SEP Facebook page, one youth, Nimesh Devanga, wrote, “There is no other program for the working class. I am genuinely happy that you put forward your program for the proletariat and in defence of Marxism. Your theory and practice are fantastic. I am studying it. This is the only correct program that I have read so far. There is no doubt about it. Victory to the world socialist revolution.”

During an election campaign outside Colombo Port, one worker told the SEP campaigners: “I did not hear that any candidates including [JVP-NPP leader] Anura Dissanayake are opposing the IMF austerity program.

“These politicians have controlled this country for 76 years and devastated our lives. They have heaped up foreign debts,” He expressed his willingness to learn the SEP program.



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