

Sri Lankan SEP presidential candidate speaks at official media briefing

Our correspondents
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Below is a summary of the remarks by Pani Wijesiriwardena, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, at a Department of Government Information (DGI) press briefing. Every presidential candidate is allocated 45 minutes by the DGI, at the request of the Sri Lankan Election Commission (EC).

Wijesiriwardena's 45-minute speech was in Sinhala and included a Tamil-language summary at the end. Like all other candidates, he had to adhere to EC guidelines and could not criticise or name any other candidate. The press conference was live-streamed on the official Facebook pages of the DGI and the SEP-Sri Lanka which are followed by thousands. According to DGI officials, the live video is directly connected to dozens of media institutions allowing them to publish it as they wish.

Good afternoon to all of you, I am Pani Wijesiriwardena, the presidential candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). I would like to begin my remarks by introducing my party. The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world party of the working class. The Fourth International was founded in 1938 under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of the 1917 Great Russian October Revolution with V. I. Lenin.

Today, Socialist Equality Parties—the national sections of the ICFI—continuously fight to take forward the Marxist program of world socialist revolution. Our sister parties in UK, the US, Germany, France, Australia and Canada are fighting to mobilise the working class internationally in a common program and perspective. We are intervening in the 2024 presidential election in Sri Lanka as part of this struggle.

We consider this election campaign an opportunity to discuss our international socialist program with workers, youth and other oppressed masses.

Various candidates of other political parties have presented their programs. In opposition to all these parties and candidates, we are fighting to build an independent political movement of the working class based on socialist policies.

The SEP is the only party that tells the truth to the working class. The theme of our campaign is “Fight for socialism against war, austerity and dictatorship.”

The US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine is

escalating. The Ukrainian ground forces have entered Russia and started to attack Russian forces with the weapons and tanks provided by the imperialist powers, including the US and Germany. This threatens to develop into a nuclear war between Russia and the imperialist powers. Israel's genocidal war against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, also backed by these imperialist powers, also threatens to expand into a region-wide war.

The foremost target of American imperialism is China, which it considers as its chief economic rival. The US is preparing for war against China, and we can clearly see the signs of this preparation in South Asia. Recent arrivals of warships from India and frequent visits by leading US and Indian officials to this island show that Sri Lanka is increasingly being dragged into the US's anti-China war strategy.

Irrespective of which capitalist candidate wins the election, they will line up with the US war drive. Not a single political party, apart from the SEP, even cares to mention the growing war danger.

The international working class is confronted with the critical question: how to prevent the disastrous third world war? The ICFI, our world movement, has called for the building of an international anti-war movement of the working class based on a socialist program to prevent this catastrophe. In our election campaign, we are discussing with workers and youth the urgency of this struggle.

The second issue is how to fight the austerity drive of the ruling class. The incumbent government is implementing the austerity program being dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). All other capitalist parties fully support the IMF program.

This austerity drive is not just confined to Sri Lanka. After the 2008 finance turmoil in the US, the central banks in every major country pumped enormous amounts of money to boost the banks and big companies. Amid the growing crisis confronting all these countries, capitalist governments are imposing the burden on the backs of the working class. At the same time, the imperialist powers are seeking to subordinate resource-rich counties to their domination. This is at the root of the looming threat of a third world war.

The Sri Lankan and international working class is not ready

to bear the burden of the capitalist crisis. The popular uprising in Sri Lanka in 2022 in which millions came into the streets and chased away the ruthless capitalist ruler is the best example of this.

There were two main slogans during the uprising: First was “Gota [President Gotabhaya Rajapakse] go home!” Second was “No to 225 [all the parliamentarians]!” expressing opposition to capitalist rule.

However, this struggle was betrayed by trade unions, with the support of pseudo-lefts, manoeuvring with the capitalist opposition political parties. As a result, Wickremesinghe was elevated into the presidency.

Countering these reactionary interventions, the SEP presented a program centered on the bringing of a workers’ and peasants’ government to power with the leadership of the working class rallying the rural masses. We proposed that the workers and the poor form action committees in every factory, workplace, neighbourhood and villages, independent of all trade union bureaucracies and every bourgeois political party. These committees are part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees proposed by the ICFI.

These action committees are democratic organs of the toiling masses, taking and implementing their decisions democratically. They are akin to the Soviets which acted as the workers’ councils that took power in the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. During the mass uprising, we developed the program of Democratic and Socialist Congress of the Workers and Rural Masses or DSC with the democratically elected delegates from these action committees.

This Congress is totally different from, and opposed to, the bourgeois parliament which is utterly hostile to the working class. Through a democratic discussion, the DSC will decide how to defeat the government’s austerity measures and anti-democratic laws and attacks, and how to intervene in every major struggle of the workers and the poor. In short, the DSC is a power centre of the working people and the oppressed.

The working class must draw fundamental lessons from the popular uprising in Sri Lanka. First, it should see the trade union bureaucracy and pseudo-left parties as a major barrier to the realisation of its class interests. Secondly, it needs its own mass revolutionary party to actualise its interests. We urge the working class and the rural toilers to build the SEP as the mass revolutionary party. The same lessons must be drawn by the working class in Bangladesh where a similar mass uprising, with some local differences, took place recently. As in Sri Lanka, the so-called interim government in Bangladesh continues IMF-dictated austerity measures, suppressing mass opposition to them.

In the name of saving the country, all capitalist candidates in Sri Lanka are seeking to put the full burden of the economic crisis onto the working class in the form of taxes, gutting education and health, privatising state-owned enterprises and cutting subsidies to the poor peasantry and rural toilers.

We demand repudiation of all foreign loans and IMF-dictated austerity. This program cannot be fulfilled by capitalist government which always serves the interests of foreign and international capital. Only a workers’ and peasants’ government that came to power, overthrowing the capitalist system, could do that.

The wealth of the billionaires kept in the banks should be seized and spent to upgrade education, health and other infrastructure, and uplifting the cultural level of the workers and the poor.

We also propose cancellation of the debts of the poor peasantry and the provision of loans on easy terms to small businesspeople.

At the same time, we propose the nationalisation of the big corporations, placing them under workers’ control. Such a situation will resolve the burning issues facing the peasants, providing plenty of money and resources for agricultural activities.

At the same time, it will relieve tea plantation workers, one of the most oppressed sections of the working class in Sri Lanka, who have been subjected to slave-like working conditions for over 200 years, by providing monthly salaries, pensions and wages indexed to the cost of living.

From 1948 onwards, successive Colombo governments have been stoking anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim racialism in order to weaken and break the class unity of Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking workers. This racial discrimination culminated in 1983 in the anti-Tamil racist war.

This brutal war was carried out for 26 years. Only the SEP and Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP’s predecessor, fought against the war. We propose that the workers’ and peasants’ government establish a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a Federation of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally.

Our economic policy is the program of international socialism. Our foreign policy is addressed to the working class in every country, not to the capitalist ruling classes. We invite workers, the poor and young people to join the fight for realising this program and the building of the SEP as the mass revolutionary party of the working class. We urge youth and students to join our youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality. And we call on you to cast your vote for Pani Wijesiriwardena, the SEP candidate in the presidential election and support this program. Our election symbol is a pair of scissors.



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