

SEP (Sri Lanka) stands in local government elections for socialism against austerity, dictatorship and war

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 local government elections to be held on May 6.

The SEP is running candidates for the Karainagar Divisional Council, in the war-ravaged Jaffna district and the Kolonnawa Urban Council, in the suburbs of Colombo, fielding 13 and 21 candidates respectively. The slates are being headed by senior party leaders Paramuthirugnana Sambanthar and Vilani Peiris.

The elections are to be held after anti-democratic postponements by two former presidents, Gotabaya Rajapakse of Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe in 2022 and 2023 respectively, who both feared the defeat of their discredited parties.

The newly-elected Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government has called the elections, declaring it to be a democratic move. Its leaders have called for a "big win" in the elections to strengthen the ruling party to carry forward its "economic recovery program."

The SEP calls on workers and the poor to reject this cynical appeal. The JVP/NPP's economic recovery program is nothing but the implementation of the

International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity measures, begun by Wickremesinghe, that have already caused great hardship for working people. Its real purpose is to repay foreign loans defaulted on by Colombo in 2022 and to boost the profits of big capital.

The recent budget for 2025 is to implement the IMF's demands. While announcing a pitiful wage increase for 1.5 million state employees, allowances have been drastically slashed.

Within months, many of the 400 or so state-owned enterprises (SOE) will be placed under a state holding company in preparation for public-private partnerships or privatisation. Thousands of jobs will be destroyed, wages slashed and workloads increased. Across the public sector, more than half a million jobs will be destroyed, according to President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's advisor.

The government, well aware that its austerity drive will lead to mass struggles of workers, rural poor and youth, is preparing dictatorial forms of rule. Its police attack and witch-hunt against protesting school development officers and repeated threats against strikes and protests opposing its policies are a warning to working people of the brutal methods in store.

The SEP was the only party that warned the working class during last year's presidential and general elections of the rightwing, pro-imperialist character of the JVP/NPP. Far from being "Marxist," the JVP had cultivated close relations with the US, was backed by significant sections of the Sri Lankan ruling class and was committed to ruthlessly imposing

the IMF agenda.

The SEP emphasises that there are no solutions to any of the burning problems confronting workers and the rural masses within the framework of capitalism or the nation state.

The SEP is campaigning for the independent mobilisation of workers to rally the rural poor and fight the government's austerity program. We call on the working class to break from all the capitalist parties and muster its enormous strength in an industrial and political struggle for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program.

Unify class struggles internationally against global capitalism and war!

The working class is not just confronting the JVP/NPP regime and capitalist class in this country, but international finance capital and all the agencies of imperialism.

The elections are being held amid a rapidly deepening world capitalist crisis, centred on US imperialism. The newly-installed American president is the fascist Donald Trump, who draws directly on Hitler and the German Nazi dictatorship of the 1930s. He is nakedly flouting the country's laws and constitution as he prepares to expel millions of immigrants, scrap essential social services, sack hundreds of thousands of state employees and go to war.

In the global arena, the Trump administration is waging an economic war on ally and foe alike, seeking to annex whole areas of the globe, including Canada, Greenland and the Panama Canal, and backing Israel's genocidal war in Gaza. His "peace" moves in the Ukraine war are simply part of his preparations for war with China, which US imperialism regards as the chief threat to its global domination.

As the world hurtles towards a disastrous global conflict, all the major powers in Europe and Asia are turning sharply to the far right, rapidly rearming for war, heaping new burdens on the working class and undermining democratic rights.

Sri Lanka is also part of the US war plans against China. Top officers of the US Indo-Pacific Command have visited Colombo—Admiral Steve Koehler in October and Admiral Samuel J. Paparo last week—to strengthen military ties. Both were welcomed by the JVP/NPP, which long ago abandoned its phoney anti-imperialist rhetoric.

Workers and youth are already responding to the agenda of war and class war of the ruling classes around the world with strikes and protests. In recent months, workers' struggles have erupted in the US against pay and job cuts as well as in many other countries, including the countries of

South Asia. Workers and youth in their millions have protested against US-backed Israeli war crimes and atrocities in Gaza.

- The international working class is the only social force that can stop the plunge towards world war. Sri Lankan workers and youth must join in building an international anti-war movement based on socialist policies to abolish capitalism and its reactionary nation-state system.

- It is imperative for workers in Sri Lanka to take the initiative in building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees established by the ICFI to coordinate the class struggle internationally.

Learn the political lessons of the 2022 mass uprising

The political lessons of the mass uprising in Sri Lanka in April-July 2022 must be learnt. Hard hit by the accelerating global economic crisis, the Rajapakse government defaulted on its foreign debt and imposed the burden on working people. Millions of workers and the oppressed masses took to the streets in strikes and protests against intolerable price rises and shortages.

Rajapakse was forced to flee the country and resign, but this was no victory. The trade unions and the opposition JVP and SJB, assisted by the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), steered the mass movement into the dead-end of parliament. The right-wing, pro-US Wickremesinghe was anti-democratically installed as president and cut a deal with the IMF. Now, the JVP has taken over from the deeply unpopular Wickremesinghe to impose the austerity agenda.

From the beginning of the uprising, the SEP actively participated, fighting for the vital socialist program and perspective which was lacking in the protest movement.

The SEP warned in its April 7, 2022 statement: “A socialist revolution is needed in Sri Lanka and for that a revolutionary leadership is essential... The entire history of the past century has demonstrated that without a revolutionary party even the most militant and determined struggles of the working class are inevitably defeated, opening the door to counter-revolution and savage repression.”

That critical political lesson must be grasped by the working class in the struggles that will inevitably emerge in the immediate future. The SEP and its candidates will campaign in the elections to build the party as the revolutionary leadership needed.

The pro-IMF opposition parties

Battered and exposed by the mass upsurge in 2022, the traditional parties of the Colombo political establishment were humiliated in last year’s presidential and general elections. Like the JVP/NPP, all of them back the IMF’s austerity program. Their phoney criticisms and calls “not to put burdens on the masses” are simply to hoodwink working people.

The largest opposition party—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), a breakaway from Wickremesinghe’s UNP—voted against the recent budget hoping to exploit the growing hostility to the government. It was the SJB, however, that pressed Rajapakse to go begging to the IMF for assistance to “save the economy” and, if it ever gets into office, will just as ruthlessly impose austerity as Dissanayake.

The pseudo-left FSP is contesting the elections under the front People’s Struggle Alliance (PSA), formed last year with other fake-left groups and union bureaucrats. Far from warning about the anti-working class character of the JVP/NPP, the PSA enthusiastically welcomed its election

victory, saying it represented “people’s aspirations.”

The PSA has continued to promote the illusion that the Dissanayake government can be pressured to implement the “people’s mandate” even as it has imposed the IMF’s austerity agenda. While lamenting the JVP/NPP’s broken election promises, the PSA has pledged to support and protect it from the “old corrupted” parties.

FSP leader Pubudu Jayagoda told the media: “People must show a red light as a warning to the government [for not implementing promises], but be cautious not to allow old corrupted [parties] to come to power.”

The Tamil capitalist parties also lost heavily in last year’s parliamentary election. In the local elections, they are struggling to form an alliance to make a comeback. Their support for the IMF austerity agenda was demonstrated in the vote on the budget—one party voted for it, while the others simply absented themselves in order to try to hide their backing for it.

Form independent action committees!

The SEP is campaigning for workers to take matters into their own hands and break with the capitalist parties and the trade union bureaucracies. The trade unions have repeatedly limited and betrayed the strikes and struggles of workers over the past two years to defend living conditions.

Now, as the JVP/NPP has accelerated the austerity program, the Government Medical Officers’ Association (GMOA) and the Health Trade Union Alliance (HTUA) leaders have abandoned their planned protests. None of the unions opposes the IMF’s dictates and all have heeded its warning that “emerging labour unrest” would sabotage its program.

We call on workers and the oppressed masses to build democratically elected action committees in every workplace to discuss and implement a struggle for their social and democratic rights. We pledge to offer our political assistance to those wanting to do so.

The SEP advances the following socialist and internationalist program:

- **Oppose all forms of nationalism and communalism! Fight for the international unity of the working class!**

The Sri Lankan ruling class has a reactionary history of resorting to anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism to divide workers. The result was three decades of a disastrous anti-Tamil war, which the JVP backed to the hilt.

The government maintains the military occupation of the North and East, where it is complicit in the communal campaign to establish Buddhist shrines. While declaring for national unity, the JVP fully backs the country’s communal constitution that enshrines Sinhala-Buddhist supremacism.

The Tamil bourgeois parties respond in the same vein—promoting Tamil nationalism to separate Tamil working people from their class brothers and sisters elsewhere on the island.

- Workers cannot fight for their class interests if they allow themselves to be divided.

- Oppose communalism! For the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers! Defend the democratic and social rights of all!

Rally the rural poor and oppressed masses!

The JVP/NPP government exploited the anger and hostility of the

farmers and rural poor to come to power, but has broken all of its promises. The meagre increase in the price of paddy rice is totally inadequate. Poor farmers weighed down with interest payments to loan sharks and exorbitant prices for seed, pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers are not even meeting their costs of production.

The SEP demands: Waive all debts owed to money lenders, including banks, micro-finance companies and private money lenders! Provide financial assistance to farmers as well as fertilisers, agrochemicals, and agricultural equipment at low prices! Guarantee a fair price for crops, including rice!

Poor farmers need to form their own independent action committees and join with the working class. Only the working class can resolve the burning issues confronting farmers, by placing agribusinesses and major companies under its democratic control to provide land and cheap agricultural inputs.

Defend all social and democratic rights!

In opposition to the government's austerity program, the SEP advocates:

- Repudiate all foreign loans, including that of the IMF! Why should we and generations to come pay for the loans taken out by capitalist governments to wage devastating communal war and boost corporate profits? All funds must be used to meet the pressing social needs of working people!

- All workers, in the private and state sectors, must receive a wage increase to compensate for the erosion of real wages! Wages must then be indexed to the cost of living! Pensioners must receive a similar increase!

- Tea plantation workers must be paid a decent monthly wage indexed to the cost of living, with paid leave and pensions!

- Withdraw all armed forces from the war-ravaged North and East! Return the lands seized by the military to their owners!

- No to pro-market restructuring of state-owned enterprises! Defend all jobs and working conditions! Put all SOEs under the democratic control of the working class!

- Immediately bring down the price of food and essential items. End the VAT and other taxes on such items!

- Provide jobs with decent wages for the 40,000 unemployed graduates and other unemployed!

- Place all banks, big companies and plantations under workers' democratic control and reorganise production and distribution for the benefit of workers and the poor, not private profits!

- Seize the assets of the wealthy few and use the funds to provide for the urgent needs of the majority!

- Abolish the executive presidency!

- Abolish all repressive laws, including the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), emergency and essential services regulations!

For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses!

The SEP calls for the establishment of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses (DSC), based on democratically elected delegates from action committees in workplaces and rural areas. Such a congress can and must discuss the adoption of a program of socialist policies and the fight for a workers' and peasants' government.

In these elections, we call for workers, the poor and youth to vote for our candidates in Karainagar and Kolonnawa to register their support for a socialist program. We do not advocate a vote for any of the candidates standing in other areas.

Read the WSWS, which is the only organ internationally arming workers and young people with a revolutionary program and the historical lessons necessary to fight for a socialist future.

Build the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) on university campuses, in other educational institutions and among young workers.

Donate to our party's 500,000 rupee (\$US1,700) party building fund.

Above all, we call on workers to join and build the SEP as the necessary revolutionary leadership for the immense struggles ahead.



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