

Sri Lanka: Meethotamulla residents' anger grows over soaring price hikes

Our reporters
8 April 2025

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is contesting the local council elections in Sri Lanka being held on May 6. It has fielded 13 candidates for the Karainagar Divisional Council, in the war-ravaged Jaffna district, and the 21 candidates for the Kolonnawa Urban Council, in the suburbs of Colombo.

The ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power and opposition parties such as the Samagi Jana Balawegaya all support the imposition of the IMF's savage austerity measures that are devastating the living conditions of working people.

The SEP is the only party campaigning for a socialist program against the escalating US-led war drive and defending the basic democratic and social rights of workers and the poor that are under constant attack.

Members of the SEP and International Students and Youth for Social Equality (IYSSE) campaigned last weekend at Meethotamulla, an area within Kolonnawa urban council. A massive garbage dump there collapsed on April 14, 2017, killing 32 people and completely destroying 146 houses.

Around 100 affected families were relocated to poorly built flats called "Laksanda Sevana," about two kilometres away. The residents criticised the former government because these small houses, each with just 400 square feet, are now dilapidated, without any maintenance.

Speaking to campaigners, residents still living at Meethotamulla expressed their anger at the government for not addressing pressing issues such as rising prices, high expenses for children's schooling, the lack of health facilities and housing problems.

Mohideen, a father of five, lives as a daily wage labourer. After the 2017 tragedy, government officials "visited houses and marked them, saying that they would provide houses in other places," he said. Only a

few people received accommodation in a flat.

"In this area, our houses get flooded even with a small amount of rain. People are suffering from various diseases. This area near Meethotamulla garbage dump is not suitable for living. However, we have no alternative."

He said that the healthcare system has been completely abandoned: "In the past, there was a practice of smoking the area to destroy mosquitos to prevent diseases like dengue. Now, all that has stopped. Now, when people get sick, they go to the dispensary but often there is no medicine."

Mohideen, facing economic problems as a result of the government's austerity measures, had to stop one of his sons going to school at the ninth grade. "I employed him at a shop selling clothes. It is difficult to meet daily expenses," he said. Two of his other children go to a nearby school and one daughter is married.

He works as a daily worker, earning 1,550 rupees (\$US5) a day and occasionally 2,000 rupees. The government's failure to control soaring prices for rice, the main staple food, and other essentials has badly affected people, he said. President Dissanayake had discussions with rice mill owners early this year and ordered a maximum price per kilo of 220 rupees. However, mill owners defied the order and are selling a kilo at 230 rupees or above.

"They [the mill owners] are getting paddy from the farmers at low prices but increase the price of rice. Mill owners hoard rice and make huge profits," he said.

SEP campaigners explained that the monopoly of the big millers could only be broken by a workers' and peasants' government nationalizing the rice mills and resolving the problems of farmers and consumers.

"We buy a small packet of milk for 215 rupees each

day and five people share it. That too has now increased by 10 rupees,” he said. “[The IMF] gives loans in a way that they can get it back. They give loans prescribing the method of debt collection. The government has to abide by their rules and conditions. We have to bear the burden,” he added.

Mohideen commented on the US president’s massive increase in tariffs on every country. “Tariffs have a big impact on the world. They have a big impact on poor countries like ours. The textile industry has already been affected, and can be closed. It is unfair. It is the strategy of the powerful countries,” he said.

“I saw this morning on YouTube that hundreds of thousands of people are protesting in New York. Trump’s policies have also caused damage within that country and people are feeling it,” he said, noting that the US stock market has slumped.

“We are connected to the world, if one eye hurts, the whole body feels it. Since we are connected to the world, if there is an economic crisis somewhere, we feel it,” he added.

A mother of two explained that the government’s education cuts had affected her children. She faced difficulty obtaining free school books for her daughters because she could not pay the annual school facilities fees. “The teachers take photos of the pages of the books and send them to us, so we go to a bookstore and get photocopies for our daughters to read,” she added.

Sumithra previously worked at the Colombo Manning market, the main vegetable market. She explained that her family is struggling to live: “My children are engaged in small jobs. My husband sells betel leaves, the daughter works as a casual labourer at a school. My son works abroad. I cannot work.”

Criticising the government’s failure to control prices of essentials, she said: “Look how the government is working, they have kept the big increase on the kerosene price of the previous government. Increasing the kerosene price is hitting the common man.” Many urban poor use small kerosene cookers for cooking.

She recalled the mass uprising in April-July 2022 that erupted as the country’s economy collapsed forcing a debt default. Prices for all essentials soared unbearably and the shortages were rampant. Long hours of power cuts prevailed.

“I joined the protests. At that time, a coconut cost about 200 rupees, and the price of onions was about

600 rupees [a kilogram]. It was a hard time. That is why the people came onto the streets.”

Pointing out the rise of the coconut price to the same level or above, and the continued increase of prices of other things, Sumithra said: “Prices of everything are going up every day. If this government continues like this, the president will have to go by such a mass uprising again.”

“This government seems to be worse than the previous one. These things are happening because of the IMF program. It is becoming devastating for people.

“The government is saying it would stop fraud and corruption. These are pretences. Sons of politicians kill people and do other things, but ultimately, they can go scot-free even through law. They are however, talking about the rule of law!

“Now there is a big celebration because the [Indian Prime Minister Narendra] Modi has come. It is good that Sri Lanka and India have relations. But, as you discussed, if behind the friendship, war preparations are taking place against China, it will be disastrous.”



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