

Sri Lankan SEP election meeting discusses how to fight IMF austerity

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a public meeting in Colombo on April 9, as part of its campaign in Sri Lanka's local government elections on May 6.

The SEP is intervening in the Karainagar Divisional Council, which is in the country's war-affected northern region, and in the Kolonnawa Urban Council, near Colombo, fielding 12 and 21 candidates respectively.

SEP and IYSSE speakers explained the deepening global crisis of capitalism, the eruption of fascist and authoritarian tendencies, the threat of world war and the need for a socialist and internationalist program.

SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena, who chaired the meeting, explained the importance of the party's election intervention in the two local government areas where the party is running candidates. The SEP and IYSSE, he said, have conducted a long struggle to educate people in these areas on the necessity for workers and youth to fight for a socialist perspective and program.

The speaker paid special attention to the rapidly changing international situation triggered by Trump's massive increases in tariffs, which constituted a series of trade war measures against the entire world. He recalled Trotsky's warnings that the contradictions of world capitalism would lead to world war.

Wijesiriwardena said Trump's tariff war was not an indication of the strength of American capitalism but its weakness. These measures, he continued, meant that the ruling elites, not just in the US but in all capitalist countries, including Sri Lanka, are working to impose the burden of this capitalist crisis on the working class.

The speaker said that, more than in previous election interventions by the party, there was a growing interest by working people and youth in the developing international situation. They are trying to understand the connection between the economic crisis in Sri Lanka, Trump's tariff measures and the global capitalist crisis, he said.

Wijesiriwardena drew out the essential political lessons of the nationwide anti-government uprising in 2022.

"The main problem," he said, "was that this mass movement was not armed with a socialist perspective and a Marxist-Trotskyist leadership. The trade union bureaucracies and fake-

left Frontline Socialist Party conspired with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Samagi Jana Balawegaya to divert this struggle into a parliamentary blind alley."

Wijesiriwardena explained that the SEP was alone in fighting to politically arm the working class during this upsurge and had emphasised the building of action committees in every workplace, as well as in rural areas.

The SEP, he continued, also called for building a Democratic and Socialist Congress based on delegations from these committees. The present situation confirms the urgency of building this Congress to fight for the defence of democratic and social rights, he said.

Sakuntha Hirimuthugoda, a leading member of the IYSSE, spoke about the anti-democratic banning of the IYSSE meeting "How to fight IMF austerity" by Peradeniya University authorities on January 3. He said the office of Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya had "inquired" about the IYSSE meeting.

The concern expressed by the authorities, Hirimuthugoda said, was the meeting topic itself which "challenged the policies of the government." The real concern of the authorities was that growing mass anger towards the government would find an expression in the IYSSE and SEP's socialist internationalist program. Since then, the government has launched a series of attacks on protests by workers and students, he added.

Hirimuthugoda told the meeting that students and youth cannot fight to defend democratic rights without orienting towards the working class and fighting for socialism. He concluded by appealing to students, young people and workers to support the IYSSE campaign.

SEP Political Committee member Vilani Peiris, the party's lead candidate for Kolonnawa, delivered the final speech to the Colombo meeting.

Peiris highlighted the implications of Trump's trade war against the entire world and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government's role in imposing the burden of the global crisis on the working class.

The speaker reviewed some of the questions raised by voters during the campaign, including one about the duplicity of the JVP and its previous claims to be "anti-imperialist." One

worker, she said, noted that the JVP was now a pro-imperialist organisation and asked whether its posturing was a “tactic” to grab power?

Peiris explained that from the outset, the JVP was a pseudo-Marxist party. “The working class needs to understand the right-wing nature of the JVP/NPP government, and for that a scientific analysis is required,” she said.

She explained the contemporary importance of the seminal analysis of the JVP by Keerthi Balasuriya in a series of articles titled *The politics and class nature of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* in 1970. Balasuriya was the founding general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the SEP.

Balasuriya’s analysis exposed the reactionary nature of the JVP’s false claims that the only force capable of carrying out an anti-imperialist struggle was the social layer imbued with “patriotism.” This blending of anti-imperialist struggle with patriotism, Peiris said, “is the total opposite of Marxist internationalism and is a program that subordinates the working class to the enemy capitalist class.”

Balasuriya forewarned that these nationalist policies and its hostility towards Tamil estate workers could transform the JVP into a fascist movement. This was demonstrated in its fascistic attacks on political opponents and workers in 1988–1990.

Peiris summarised the brutal decades-long attacks on the working class by one Sri Lankan capitalist government after another with the support of trade union bureaucracies.

The speaker said the JVP/NPP government was following the policies of the previous regimes and continuing the IMF’s austerity attacks on the working class and rural masses.

Housing is a major problem in Sri Lankan cities and villages, Peiris said, but that had not been addressed by successive governments. She recalled how governments used the police to demolish the homes of the poor, forcibly evacuating them from areas they had lived in for decades and handing over the land to big investors.

Peiris told the meeting that JVP minister Nalinda Jayathissa recently announced that the government will give more land in Colombo and Kataragama in the south to local and foreign investors. She said the urban poor and the rural masses needed to form independent action committees and organise along with the working class on a socialist program and in unity with the international working class to defeat this repression.

The speaker concluded by urging those in attendance to vote for the SEP, participating in its campaign and joining its ranks.

After the meeting, **Malinda, a young construction worker**, said, “I agree with Vilani, the working class needs to be educated. Workers must be taught to think beyond the capitalist system. International solidarity of the working class is essential.

“Everyone is talking about tariff increases by President Trump and an important analysis of this was presented in the

meeting. This issue shows the growing danger of war and the importance of calling for the international solidarity of the working class against it.

“The public, right from beginning of their school education, is taught how to live under the capitalist system and not taught to overcome it. Other parties say the solution to the problems we face can be found within the capitalist system, but your party is different. The SEP explains that none of the fundamental problems facing humanity can be solved under the capitalist system and that world socialism is necessary. These are important points,” he said.

A Ceylon Electricity Board worker attending his first SEP meeting said: “The meeting explained that, according to the orders of the IMF, around 400 state institutions are being privatised. Five hundred thousand jobs will be lost.

“I work at the Electricity Board and the main issue we face is the privatisation of our institution. This NPP government has brought in a new electricity bill, but we don’t know what’s in it. We do not know whether we will receive compensation or whether our jobs will be protected.

“We face a world situation, however, and the question is whether we can protect jobs with just a vote. I think that the US is trying to undermine the economies of small countries like us as well. After all, Trump’s tariffs will affect the whole world.

“As was explained in the meeting, the world is being pushed towards war. This meeting said that we should form workers’ action committees and organise for our rights. This is important and I’m studying it.

“I’ve bought both your books on the JVP and *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, Germany 1931–1932, and the *Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Peasants* to study your politics.”



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