

SEP march in Sri Lanka against US-Israel assault on Lebanon

By our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka held a march and public meeting in Colombo on August 8 to oppose the US-Israel military offensive in Lebanon. The march took place amid a tense atmosphere in the capital, due to the escalation of fighting between the Sri Lankan military and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka's east. During the march, a bomb exploded in southern Colombo, killing two people and severely injuring six.

Nearly 100 SEP members and supporters, workers, students and youth participated in the march, which started at 3 p.m. on a working day. They displayed banners and placards reading, "Withdraw Israel troops from Lebanon", "Stop US-Israel invasion in Lebanon", "Fight for a united socialist republic in Middle East" and "Stop war preparations against Iran and Syria", as well as "Withdraw Sri Lankan troops from north and east", "Build the SEP" and "Build the International Committee of the Fourth International".

Along the march, SEP members distributed hundreds of copies, in Sinhala and Tamil, of WSWs editorial board statements on the Lebanon war. A half-hour picket at the Lipton Circle near Colombo Town Hall attracted the attention of thousands of working people.

At the end of the march, more than 150 people attended the SEP meeting at the Colombo Public Library Auditorium. Chairing the meeting, K. Ratnayake, a member of the SEP political committee and the WSWs International Editorial Board (IEB), explained that the march and meeting were not just to condemn the US-Israel invasion of Lebanon. "Our aim is to bring a political perspective to the working people," he said. He drew attention to the continuous analysis published by the WSWs of the predatory war aims of Israel and the US.

Ratnayake pointed out that Sri Lankan President

Mahinda Rajapakse, a longtime president of the Palestinian Solidarity Organisation and who routinely introduced himself as a "friend of Arab people", had not issued a statement on the Lebanon war or Israel's brutal offensive in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. "His main concern is to get US help for his own so-called 'war on terrorism' here against the LTTE," Ratnayake said.

SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris exposed the callous attitude of the South Asian governments to the plight of the tens of thousands of immigrant workers from Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh trapped in Lebanon. On Sri Lankan government television, Labour Minister Athavuda Seneviratna had admitted that only 4,000 of the 93,000 Sri Lankan workers had been evacuated. "Insisting that these workers are a major source of foreign exchange to Sri Lanka, he blatantly said he had no wish to bring all of them back. He stated that his plan is to send another 400,000 Sri Lankan workers there."

M. Thevarajah, another SEP political committee member, explained that Israel's war, carried out with full US backing, was a continuation of the US-led military aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq. He also drew the connection between Rajapakse's silence on the war and his own government's military offensive in Sri Lanka's east. "Rajapakse can't speak against this war because his government is using the Israeli-built Kfir aircraft to bomb innocent Tamil and Muslim people in the Muttur and Sampur areas in the eastern province, just as Israel does in Lebanon."

SEP general secretary and IEB member Wijie Dias stressed that the war in Lebanon marked a milestone in the US drive for world domination. "It uses the Zionist regime in Israel as a tool in its imperialist venture. By encouraging and abetting Israel to pursue its

expansionist ambitions, the Bush administration is set on widening its aggressive net beyond Iraq and Lebanon to subjugate Syria and Iran and assert full control of the oil-rich Middle East region,” he said.

Dias exposed the bogus pretext cited by Israel to justify its military aggression—the capture of two Israeli soldiers—explaining that the war had been a long-standing item in its agenda. He also pointed to the growing awareness among ordinary people throughout the world, including in Israel, about the underlying imperialist strategy. In many parts of the world, workers and youth had joined demonstrations denouncing the attacks on the Palestinians in Gaza and the invasion of Lebanon.

Dias drew attention to the parallels between the behaviour of the US and Israel in Lebanon and the Rajapakse government’s escalation of the civil war in Sri Lanka.

“Here too the pretext for the re-starting the war was a lie. The Sri Lankan government puts on a humanitarian garb, accusing the LTTE of closing the Mavilaru sluice gate that supplied water for local farmers. Consecutive governments, including the present one, have neglected the basic needs of the people in these areas. Suddenly they have been awakened to fulfill the ‘humanitarian needs’ of the people.”

Dias pointed out that the government and its military had purposely disrupted opportunities for a negotiated settlement nearly 10 days before the armed conflict resumed. Even after four days of bloody fighting in Muttur, where more than 100 people perished and over 40,000 people were displaced, the military refused to let up its attacks when the LTTE offered to withdraw from Muttur and open the sluice gate.

Dias explained that the Rajapakse regime’s desire to re-ignite the civil war was related to the growing hostility among workers and peasants toward the government; the developing class struggle, involving nerve centres of the economy like the electricity board, ports and the petroleum corporation; and the worsening economic crisis.

In conclusion, he said: “The SEP insists that the working class needs a perspective and program for stopping the war in Sri Lanka and imperialist aggression worldwide. This program must be indissolubly joined with the task of abolishing social inequality. Such a perspective must consciously fight

for the unification of the movement of working people against imperialism and for an international socialist solution.”

After the meeting, several students spoke to the WSWS. An older student at the Workers Education Institute of the University of Colombo said: “It is important that meetings like this have been organised. I now know a lot about the issues involved in the Lebanon war, especially, the US geo-political interests behind it. The meeting surely contributed to forming an opinion about the world political situation.”

Two students from the Aesthetic University of Sri Lanka said: “This is the first time we have come across a meeting of such calibre. It was a new experience. We were specially taken by the parallels drawn between the pretexts and further developments following the Lebanon invasion and the Mavilaru incident in Sri Lanka. We were convinced that to understand a local development it is important to follow international events and draw the connection.”

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