

Sri Lankan SEP holds final election meeting

By our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka held a public meeting in the Colombo Public Library Auditorium on Sunday evening to conclude the party's campaign for the April 8 general elections. The SEP is running 58 candidates in four districts—the capital Colombo, Jaffna in the north, Nuwara Eliya in the central hills and Galle in the south.

During the campaign for the meeting, SEP and ISSE members and supporters visited working class residential areas, circulated thousands of copies of the SEP election manifesto and discussed the party's program and perspectives with many people. This was the final public meeting in a series that extended to Jaffna, Hatton, Galle and Ambalangoda. About 100 workers, youth, professional people and housewives, including party supporters from various parts of the country, attended.

Opening the meeting, SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris, who heads the party slate for the Colombo district, said: "This election is being held under conditions where the United Peoples Freedom Alliance government is violating democratic rights and intensifying its intimidation of political opponents."

Peiris, who chaired the meeting, detailed the government's arrest of opposition presidential candidate, former general Sarath Fonseka, and his supporters on unsubstantiated charges of "conspiracy to topple the government," as well as the witch hunt against opposition members and supporters at workplaces.

"During our campaigns among port workers they complained that they cannot discuss politics among themselves because anyone who opposes the government will face repression," Peiris said, adding that the workers also had no voice through the trade unions. "They have refused to join unions due to the betrayals of the unions," she noted.

Peiris pointed out that the opposition parties, including the right-wing United National Party (UNP) and the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), had backed President Mahinda Rajapakse's war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and shared his government's economic policies. Only the SEP was fighting for a socialist alternative.

Peiris noted that Sri Lanka's total public debt had reached 4 trillion rupees, or 86 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in 2009. Balance of payment problems had forced the Rajapakse government to seek a loan of \$US2.6 billion from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which insisted that the budget deficit must be slashed from nearly 10 percent to 5 percent of GDP by 2011.

"This will create a situation like in Greece," Peiris said, referring to the Greek government's moves to impose the burden of that country's debt crisis upon working people through wage freezes, the extension of the pension age in the public sector and cuts to subsidies. "Rajapakse is seeking a two thirds majority in parliament through the April 8 elections so that he can consolidate his police-state apparatus to crush the inevitable struggles of the working people and oppressed masses that will erupt when he carries out the required attacks on living conditions."

Kapila Fernando, the ISSE convener in Sri Lanka, warned that the Rajapakse government had already introduced new repressive legislation against university students. "According to this new bill, all new entrants to universities and their parents must sign a bond pledging that students will not be involved in ragging and violence. The aim of this bill is to effectively ban any discussion among students on political issues and their pressing problems."

The final speaker, SEP Political Committee member K. Ratnayake, said: "The April 8 elections will mark a turning point in Sri Lankan politics. Rajapakse's

government is preparing to extensively use police-state measures following the elections. He insists that a 'strong government' is needed to wage a 'war on the development front,' likening it to the war against the LTTE. This is the language of ruthlessly unloading the burden of the economic crisis onto workers."

The speaker explained that the political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka could not be understood without considering it as part of the international situation. Governments internationally had responded to the financial turmoil in 2008 by spending billions of dollars to save the banks and corporate giants, vastly increasing national debts. Now these governments demanded that the working people pay for this crisis through severe cutbacks to public spending and new taxes.

Ratnayake warned that the developments in Sri Lanka had reached a critical stage: "The Sri Lankan economy has been severely affected by the 26-year long civil war and global recession. The IMF has stalled the third instalment of its loan and is demanding that the next budget start to implement its conditions." The speaker referred to remarks made by an IMF official, Koshy Mathai, last week in Colombo, who reminded the government that it had to make "difficult choices" in budget deficit reductions.

Ratnayake said such attacks on the living conditions of the working class could not be carried out peacefully: "That is why the Rajapakse government is seeking to change the constitution to suit its aims to further strengthen autocratic powers." While the UNP and the JVP have criticised Rajapakse's attacks on opposition figures, they had no fundamental differences with his economic policies or repressive methods. If they were in power they would carry out similar policies.

Ratnayake explained that the main obstacle facing the working class was its political unpreparedness to challenge and defeat the attacks being prepared by the Rajapakse government. Working people had to break from all the capitalist parties, their ex-left appendages such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP), and all the various trade unions lined up with them.

The speaker concluded: "The working class must take a politically independent initiative. We propose the building of action committees at workplaces, in

towns and villages. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers alike must demand the withdrawal of the Sri Lankan military from the north and east, and unite to fight for a Sri Lanka Eelam Socialist Republic as part of struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally."

WSWS correspondents spoke with several of the meeting's participants.

Jagath, a young hospital worker, commented: "I was searching for your party for a long time as I have gone through your web site and other literature. I had a kind of impression of your politics, especially internationalism, equality and the stance taken against the country's civil war. The changes taking place in the world are forcing me to learn politics.

"I believe that Marxism is the only scientific way to come out of this impasse. Your speakers provided a detailed picture of the global financial and political crisis and the dangers faced by humanity, especially the working class. It was very interesting when the speakers explained the debt crisis as a world phenomenon. President Rajapakse has to do the same thing as the government in Greece."

Medagama, a vendor, explained: "I found a copy of your election manifesto at the Kelaniya University. I read it two or three times. It is a very important document on local and international politics. It has advanced a program for the workers and the farmers along socialist lines. I felt that this was the only way forward for the workers and I discussed it with several people. Then I came to take part in your meeting.

"I was a sympathiser of the JVP for two decades. I couldn't agree with their decision to make an alliance with President [Chandrika] Kumaratunga's coalition in 2004. Thereafter I broke from them completely. I had taken a wrong stance toward the war and now I realise the reactionary nature of that. As a JVP supporter, I supported the war waged by the Colombo rulers. As your manifesto and the speakers explained, this war has been a big blow for the workers and other poor people."

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