

Socialist Equality Party manifesto for Sri Lankan provincial election

By the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing a slate of 19 candidates, headed by Political Committee member Paramu Thirugnanasampanthar, for the Jaffna District in the Northern Provincial Council election to be held on September 21. Our candidates are workers, fishermen, housewives and retirees from Sri Lanka's three communities—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim.

The SEP is the only party fighting for a socialist and internationalist program against the growing dangers of war in the Indo-Pacific region, the government's savage austerity agenda and the use of military-police measures to enforce it. We oppose the ongoing military occupation of the North and the divisive communal politics of all the parties of the political establishment.

Sri Lanka is not exempt from the impact of the worst global crisis of capitalism since the 1930s and the geo-political conflicts that it is fuelling. The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has already imposed the International Monetary Fund's demands for cuts to jobs, essential services and price subsidies, and will make even deeper inroads into living standards. The army's recent killing, at Weliveriya, of three villagers, protesting over the pollution of their water supply, is a warning that the austerity agenda will not be imposed peacefully.

The provincial council election itself is a product of the whirlpool of regional rivalries into which the island has been drawn. Like his counterparts throughout the region, Rajapakse is engaged in a precarious balancing act between his government's economic dependence on China, and demands from Washington to align with its aggressive "pivot to Asia" against Beijing.

Rajapakse reluctantly called the election—the first in more than a quarter of a century—under pressure from the US and India. He was caught between appeasing Sinhala extremists, who are bitterly opposed to any concessions to the island's Tamil elites, and the demands of Washington and New Delhi for the election in the predominantly Tamil province to proceed as part of a "political solution" to the country's protracted civil war.

The US has not the slightest concern for the democratic rights of the island's Tamils. Washington backed Rajapakse's war and aided the Sri Lankan military to defeat the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009. Only then did the US begin its limited criticism of Colombo's war crimes, in order to press Rajapakse to distance himself from China.

The US diplomatic interventions in Sri Lanka are part of its strategy throughout the Indo-Pacific region to undermine Chinese influence and prepare for war. Over the past four years, the Obama administration has strengthened US alliances, established new military basing arrangements with Australia, Singapore and the Philippines, and greatly heightened tensions throughout the Indo-Pacific region. The US-led occupation of Afghanistan, along with drone strikes inside Pakistan, continues. Encouraged by the US, India has taken a more aggressive stance toward China, inflaming the Sino-Indian border dispute.

The entire Colombo political establishment, including pseudo-left

organisations such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP), is completely silent on the US war plans against China. The various Tamil bourgeois parties, such as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), falsely promote the US as a champion of democratic rights, hoping thereby to secure support for their own sordid manoeuvres for a "political solution"—that is, a power-sharing deal with Colombo.

The SEP's election campaign is aimed at breaking this conspiracy of silence and mobilising working people and youth against imperialist war and militarism, in unity with the working class throughout South Asia and around the world.

The provincial election

There is also a complete silence in the election campaign surrounding the civil war in Sri Lanka, which had such devastating consequences. More than half the Sri Lankan army is deployed in the North and will maintain a tight grip over every aspect of life, regardless of who wins the provincial council election. Thousands of families are still displaced and live without any permanent shelter or a livelihood. More than 4,000 families live in refugee camps controlled by the military, without adequate food, health care or schools for their children. Tens of thousands of hectares have been fenced off for use by the military and local and foreign investors.

The government and its coalition allies base their campaign on lies. Rajapakse flatly denies that the military carried out any war crimes or abuses of democratic rights. His promise to bring "peace and prosperity" after the end of the war has proven to be a complete fraud. Sections of the business elite, especially speculators and government cronies, have amassed profits, but the vast majority of working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—have seen their living standards plummet. The government has imposed what amounts to a wage freeze, even as the cost of living has soared.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have no fundamental differences with the government's pro-market agenda. Both parties backed the Rajapakse government's war to the hilt and continue to cover up for its war crimes. Workers and youth should reject with contempt the UNP's claims—tirelessly promoted by the pseudo-lefts of the NSSP and USP—that it defends democratic rights. Like the government, the UNP is mired in Sinhala supremacism and was responsible for starting and prosecuting the war. The longstanding role of the pseudo-lefts has been to block any independent mobilisation of the working class, and behind it the oppressed masses, in the struggle for political power.

None of the various parties of the Tamil bourgeoisie offers any alternative. All of them continue to base themselves on Tamil communal politics, which has proven a disaster for the working class. In one way or another, they promote the lie that provincial autonomy would improve the lot of working people and end the systematic abuse of democratic rights. In reality, these parties represent the interests of the venal Tamil elites who are seeking to protect their privileges through a power-sharing deal

with the Colombo establishment.

The Tamil National Alliance, which functioned as the LTTE's mouthpiece during the final years of the war, now grovels to the US, India and other powers to put pressure on the Rajapakse government to make concessions. In a bid to gain international backing, the TNA chose a member of the Colombo establishment as its candidate for chief minister, former Supreme Court Judge C.V. Wigneswaran. He told the *Sunday Times*: "At this particular time, it is necessary for a person who is able to discuss matters with the government, with India, with foreign countries to be there [as chief minister]."

The lessons of the civil war

It is necessary to draw a political balance sheet of the war that wracked the island for nearly three decades. The conflict is a tragic but irrefutable confirmation of a basic tenet of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution—the utter incapacity of the bourgeoisie in backward countries to satisfy the democratic aspirations of working people. The defence of democratic rights falls to the working class, as part of an independent revolutionary struggle for socialism and workers' power.

For decades, successive Colombo governments resorted to anti-Tamil discrimination and pogroms to divide working people and deflect any challenge to their rule. But the road to war was not inevitable. The Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI) opposed the divisive communalism of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and fought to unite the working class in Sri Lanka and throughout the Indian subcontinent on the basis of an international socialist program. The BLPI's liquidation into the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the LSSP's subsequent degeneration and betrayal, when it joined the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964, generated great confusion in the working class and allowed communal politics to flourish.

In 1972, the second SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition government fuelled communal tensions by imposing a constitution that made Buddhism the state religion and discriminated against Tamils in jobs, education and business. Desperate to divide the opposition to its regressive pro-market agenda, the subsequent UNP government resorted to one anti-Tamil provocation after another, culminating in the 1983 pogrom that marked the onset of conflict. Both the SLFP and UNP ruthlessly prosecuted the war, which ended in 2009 with a bloodbath that cost the lives of tens of thousands of civilians.

The defeat of the LTTE was not primarily due to its military weaknesses, but was a consequence of the inherent flaws of its program of Tamil separatism. From the outset, its aim was to carve out a capitalist state in the North and East of the island, with the backing of India or other powers. The 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord that established the provincial council system was a devastating exposure of the LTTE and all the armed Tamil groups that put their faith in the Indian government and its "peace-keepers." New Delhi's aim from the outset was to suppress the Tamil insurgency, which threatened to trigger unrest in India. Yet the LTTE learnt nothing from this bitter experience and continued to look to the Indian bourgeoisie for support.

The LTTE was never oriented to the working class—the only social force capable of waging a struggle for democratic rights. It bitterly opposed any attempt to unify Tamil and Sinhala workers, blaming the "Sinhala people" as a whole for the crimes of Colombo governments. Its indiscriminate suicide bombings of Sinhalese civilians played directly into the hands of the Colombo establishment and deepened the communal divide. Within the territory under its control, the LTTE resorted to increasingly anti-democratic methods of rule. As a result, as its defences crumbled in 2009, the LTTE was incapable of making any appeal to the Tamil masses, let alone to the working class of the island and internationally. It was left to making futile appeals to the "international community"—that is, to the very powers that had backed, aided and armed the Sri Lankan military.

The SEP is the only party that has steadfastly opposed the bloody civil war waged by successive Colombo governments and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of troops from the North and East. We have consistently fought to unite the working class in opposition to all forms of nationalism and chauvinism in the struggle for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally.

Support the SEP campaign

The SEP calls on workers and youth to vote for our candidates. Above all, however, our campaign is aimed at mobilising the working class and oppressed masses, independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie, in the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

Class struggles are already emerging. The government faces growing popular resistance, strikes and protests—from public sector workers over pay demands, farmers against the fertiliser subsidy cut and fishermen opposed to the fuel price increase. University students have demonstrated against the attacks on free education. The government's response has been to try to whip up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism, to divide and divert the opposition, and to resort to the police-state measures built up over decades of war to suppress any resistance.

The opposition of working people in Sri Lanka to defend their basic rights is part of the growing international resistance, strikes and revolutionary struggles of the working class, above all in Egypt. Despite their determination and size, however, these initial class struggles have revealed the profound crisis of political perspective within the working class. In the absence of conscious revolutionary leadership, the working class has been pushed back, while the ruling classes and their political parties, aided by various pseudo-left organisations such as SYRIZA in Greece and the Revolutionary Socialists in Egypt, have been able to prevail and maintain their rule.

The SEP's election campaign in Sri Lanka is part of a coordinated struggle being waged with our sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world party of socialist revolution, that is aimed, above all, at advancing the socialist and internationalist program on which the new revolutionary leadership of the working class must be built.

The Revolutionary Communist League, the SEP's forerunner, was founded in 1968 in opposition to the LSSP's betrayal, in order to carry forward the struggle of the ICFI for the scientific program and perspective of Trotskyism, that is, of revolutionary Marxism, against Stalinism and all forms of national opportunism.

We call on workers, youth and intellectuals to support our campaign in every way.

The SEP demands:

- Withdraw the military from the North and East!
- For a unified struggle of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers to rally all the oppressed to establish a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam!
- Down with the US drive to war! Forward to a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally!
- Vote for the SEP and join it to build the International Committee of the Fourth International as the world party of socialist revolution!

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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