

Sri Lanka: SEP election campaign reveals widespread disillusion with main political parties

By our correspondents
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Teams of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters have launched an intense campaign for its presidential candidate Pani Wijesiriwardena in several areas across the country during the past two weeks. These include parts of Colombo, Kandy, Chilaw, Gampaha and Hatton where public meetings were also held. Campaigners have distributed thousands of copies of the SEP election manifesto and other party literature.

The election is scheduled for January 8. Apart from Wijesiriwardena, 18 other candidates are contesting, including President Mahinda Rajapakse and opposition “common candidate” Maithripala Sirisena.

Derana TV, a popular Sinhala channel provided a chance for Wijesiriwardena to participate in the Debating Platform on December 10. He was able to explain party policy for about 10 minutes. Using the right for candidates to air their position, Wijesiriwardena spoke for the 30-minute time allocation on SEP party policy on national television in both Sinhala and Tamil languages. The Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation gave him 15 minutes too.

Campaign in Chilaw

In the Chilaw area people expressed their hatred of the deception by the Rajapakse government, the increase in prices of consumer articles, especially fuel prices which affects fishermen badly by increasing their cost of running boats.

“This is not like the previous elections. Whoever becomes president will not bring any good for ordinary people. The situation will worsen,” said one retired state employee now running a small business to meet family expenses.

“The state television talks of development programs. But we are unable to maintain our lives. We cannot get a child admitted to school. We cannot afford to get medicine for the sick. Unlike in the past, massive sums of money are spent by the MPs and ministers and even local government officials for election propaganda.”

He added that apart from the SEP no other party was raising the danger of a third world war. “But when we watch foreign news on TV, such as the war situation in the Middle East and the Ukraine, we come to know something. The media and political parties in this country pay no attention to this. It is the capitalists that want the war, not the poor masses.”

A small boat operator in Aluthwatte near Chilaw explained the situation they faced after the government increased fuel prices by 50 percent in 2012. He recalled how the police shot at them when they held protests against the price hike killing a colleague Anthony Fernando. He contemptuously said: “Now that the election is closing in they have reduced fuel prices.”

University students

Students at University of Colombo drew attention to the intensified US intervention in Sri Lanka affairs.

Dhanushka, a second-year student who was from Badulla in the central hills, explained that because his parents were farmers facing regular losses he has been compelled to cut monthly expenses down to 6,000 rupees (\$US45) a month. He added: “Even after getting a degree we cannot find a decent job. I’m compelled to do extra exams like the chartered accountants to find better prospect.”

Speaking of the election Dhanushka said, “The government is using the war victory [against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam]. It is

suppressing democracy in the country people may vote for the common candidate of the opposition, but they stand to lose whoever comes to power. All the governments deceived the masses. I'm disgusted with politics."

Dhanushka said the drive to war was a result of the power hunger of the imperialist leaders. He was attracted by the SEP's explanation that war arose out of competition for profit and the contradiction between private property and the socialised production.

IYSSE supporters came across a section of students who have been affected by the cuts to social programs that imposed on the orders of the IMF. They had been diverted into support the "common opposition" candidate Sirisena through the propaganda of the right-wing United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and fake left organisations such as Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP).

Sirisena, a former Rajapakse government cabinet minister defected from the ruling party at the instigation of opposition UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the full knowledge of Washington. It is an attempt to establish a government that will toe the US line against China.

Ratmalana railway

A campaign team visited the housing area of railway workers adjacent to the Ratmalana Railway Work Shops in the outskirts of Colombo. Hundreds of railway workers are living in these houses. Most of the properties are badly in need of repairs but which are being neglected by the government.

Railway workers expressed their dissatisfaction about decreasing real wages. One worker commented that while prices are frequently increasing his salary had been almost the same for last several years. Many railway employees are working day and nights to earn more. Referring to Rajapakse and Sirisena, the two major candidates, he said, "We know that both of them are the same but wonder what we can do? What I think is that Rajapakse will grab power somehow and continue the oppression." He praised the SEP for fielding a presidential candidate and said, "I congratulate your efforts in fielding a working-class candidate."

A worker from the Dialog (a private telecom company) who is living with his brother's family in

railway housing commented: "Dialog has set up a separate Man Power Agency to recruit workers like us. Now there are several hundred workers recruited through this Agency." He has worked for the company for eight years as a contract worker who can be retrenched at any time. After listening to SEP campaigners he said "I realise that neither Rajapakse nor Sirisena will make any real change to this oppressive system." He contributed to the SEP election fund and said he would read the SEP program and consider voting for its presidential candidate.

Prasadika, a railway worker's wife, said, "We need a change for sure. But there's no assurance there will be a change even whoever comes to power. I have two children and we need at least 40,000 rupees to send them to school and other expenses. Life is getting more difficult each day."

She commented on the preparations of the world war and said, "I do agree that internal situation in the country is decided by the external conditions in the world. My question is how to stop a world war if it is going to happen?" She listened to SEP campaigners attentively when they explained the necessity to build an anti-war movement of the international working class on a socialist basis.

One school student, the son of a railway worker, commented, "I see these devastating bombings by US forces on television and wonder what can do to stop these attacks. After listening to you I realise that we should organise." He said he would read the web site and come to SEP meetings.

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