

Local government election in Sri Lanka: Support SEP campaign against austerity and war! Fight for a workers' and peasants' government!

By the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka is standing candidates in local government elections to be held on February 10. The SEP will contest three local bodies—Kayts in the war-ravaged northern Jaffna Peninsula, Ambagamuwa near Hatton in the central tea plantation district and Kolonnawa in Colombo's suburbs—fielding 16, 24 and 21 candidates respectively.

The SEP candidates will be fighting for the international socialist program needed by workers, youth and the poor, who are increasingly coming to struggle against the attacks of the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. We are campaigning to mobilise the working class in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, independently of every faction of the capitalist class, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and various pseudo-left groups.

The election has been declared amid widespread anti-government unrest among workers, the rural poor and youth that underscores the explosive social and political conditions on the island. Not a single day passes without such protests and struggles. All the parties of the political establishment are determined to prevent this developing movement from challenging capitalist rule, and to divert it into impotent appeals to the powers-that-be.

In July, a strike by Petroleum Corporation workers impacted throughout the country. In November, an occupation by Hambantota Port workers in December 2016 against retrenchments was revived. Tens of thousands of railway and postal workers also went on strike, demanding salary revisions. Plantation workers held protests against increasing workloads and declining real wages.

University students, supported by doctors, were engaged in a nine-month lecture boycott against the privatisation of education.

In the north, which was devastated by the 26-year communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), there have been continuous demonstrations to demand the return of land seized by the military, information about hundreds of "disappeared," the release of political prisoners and improved living conditions.

In rural areas, thousands of poor have protested against rising indebtedness and the slashing of subsidies, and demanded essential social services.

The government has reacted by using draconian essential services legislation and mobilising the military, police and associated thugs, with the support of the trade unions and pseudo-lefts, to suppress these struggles. The fundamental question confronting those engaged in these protests is the lack of a revolutionary leadership of the working class to

rally the oppressed on the basis of an international socialist program.

The widespread unrest in Sri Lanka is part of the intensified class struggles now unfolding internationally. A mass eruption has begun in Iran. In the US, struggles against the Trump administration's attacks on workers, including immigrants, intensify. French workers are fighting stringent labour laws while Ford workers in Romania are up against cuts in wages and working conditions. In India, a recent country-wide protest by doctors against medical cuts and a strike by Tamil Nadu bus workers are just indications of the enormous social tensions developing among the multi-million working class in South Asia.

These upheavals are being fueled by the deepening breakdown of capitalism internationally following the 2008-09 global financial crisis. The response of the ruling classes in every country has been to intensify a social counter-revolution, leading to ever-widening social inequality. The world's richest 1 percent today owns half of the world's wealth.

The economic breakdown is also fuelling sharpening geo-political tensions as the major powers seek to impose the burden on their rivals. US imperialism, which has waged a quarter century of neo-colonial wars, is preparing for a nuclear confrontation with China and Russia in a bid to maintain its global dominance. Other major powers, such as Germany and Japan, are rapidly expanding their militaries in bids to defend their interests.

The government in Colombo is deeply mired in these geo-political rivalries and the drive to war. Assuming power in 2015 in a regime-change operation backed by Washington, Sirisena immediately aligned Sri Lanka's foreign policy with the US. However, the cash-strapped government was soon compelled to seek financial assistance from Beijing, even as the US and India continue to exert pressure on Colombo to distance itself from China.

The crisis of Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government

Three years on, the unity government of the island's two bourgeois parties—the United National Party (UNP) of Wickremesinghe and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Sirisena—is teetering on the brink of collapse. At the centre of the crisis is the radicalisation of workers, youth and the rural poor—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike. The government is thoroughly discredited among the masses because of its savage austerity measures and suppression of democratic rights.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is dictating pro-market restructuring in response to the economy's deterioration. Sri Lanka's growth rate declined to 4 percent last year from 4.5 percent. Exports are falling due to global tensions and the contraction of key markets. Foreign debt has risen sharply to 79 percent of gross domestic product. Inflation is

at 7 percent and increasing due to the devaluation of the rupee, eating into the living conditions of workers and the poor.

Deep divisions have opened up in the government as the coalition partners seek to shift the blame for its unpopular policies. Sirisena's SLFP is contesting the local council elections separately, in a bid to distance itself from its UNP partner, and pretending it is not responsible for "selling national assets" and rampant government corruption.

Wickremesinghe, for his part, is trying to counter Sirisena by falsely claiming that his government has put the country on the path of economic development, addressing social issues and creating one million jobs.

The government is also facing a challenge from former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who heads a rival faction of the SLFP. In recent months, Sirisena desperately tried to reunite the party but talks with Rajapakse collapsed after the latter demanded that the SLFP break from the UNP and the government.

Rajapakse has since launched the Sri Lanka Podu Jana Peramuna (SLPJP) in a bid to corral anti-government sentiment. He has called for the toppling of the government on the basis of a reactionary communal campaign against Tamils and Muslims, with Buddhist monks in the forefront. He has no fundamental policy differences with the government and, when in office, was just as ruthless in imposing the IMF's austerity demands.

All the political forces that backed the installation of Sirisena in 2015 are now seeking to distance themselves from the government and lurching further to the right.

While officially leading the parliamentary opposition, the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is a de-facto partner in the ruling coalition and is widely discredited among Tamils. It helped block an international probe into the army's war crimes and approves the continuing military occupation of the northern and eastern provinces. The TNA plays the communal card, saying the "unity of Tamils" must be maintained to "bargain with Colombo."

The Tamil National People's Front and Tamil National Liberation Front are seeking to capitalise on anti-TNA sentiment by stirring up Tamil nationalism and claiming that Colombo can be pressured to grant basic rights to Tamils—in reality, privileges for the Tamil elite. All these parties clamour for US support and ingratiate themselves to Washington by backing its geopolitical interests.

The Tamil parties active among the plantation workers are no different. Notwithstanding their factional clashes, all are aligned with one or other of the main bourgeois parties in Colombo.

The JVP backed the election of Sirisena three years ago and is today trying to posture as an opponent. Its campaign is centred on attacking government corruption and promising to "develop the village." In reality, the JVP has supported successive SLFP and UNP governments as they have been deepening the assault on living standards, including those of the rural masses.

The pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) is one of the most strident defenders of the UNP and the present government. It has formed the "National Front to protect good governance" and is campaigning to "protect the government against the fascist Rajapakse group." This party notoriously attacked recent strikes and protests by workers and students as "right-wing conspiracies," justifying the government's police-state measures.

The United Socialist Party (USP) and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) also backed Sirisena in 2015, supposedly to oust the "dictatorship of Rajapakse." Now they are singing a different tune, criticising the government they helped into office for its "dictatorship" and calling for the establishment of a "left movement." The sole purpose of such a political formation would be to block a genuine movement of the working class to abolish capitalism.

Workers and youth should draw the necessary political lessons and

consciously prepare for the class battles ahead. A complete political break is necessary from the SLFP and the UNP, as well as all their fake left hangers-on and apologists, who have been responsible for one disaster after another since independence in 1948. The allies of the working class are not to be found in one or other faction of the capitalist class in Colombo but among fellow workers in Asia and around the world, who confront similar attacks on their basic rights.

In opposition to all the parties of the Colombo political establishment, the SEP calls on workers, youth and rural poor to vote for its candidates and take up the fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on an international socialist perspective. We fight for the unity of workers—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—and oppose all forms of nationalism and communalism, whose only purpose is to divide the working class and prop up capitalist rule.

The SEP's program is based on the following fundamental planks:

Against imperialist war!

Behind the backs of working people, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government has tied the country into the US war drive. US and Indian warships frequent the island's ports and the US Pacific Command is training Sri Lankan naval personnel and marines. Under the government of Narendra Modi, India has been transformed into a frontline state of US strategic moves against China. In the event of any conflict, Sri Lanka will be a launching pad for the US military.

Except for the SEP, none of the parties in the election even mentions the danger of war. Instead, they all seek to deceive working people into believing that no such threat exists. The SEP, along with its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is fighting to build a socialist international movement of working class and youth against the imperialist war.

Defend democratic rights!

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is increasingly using police-state measures against the working people and youth. Not only has it used existing emergency laws against workers but is preparing even more draconian laws to replace the Prevention of Terrorism Act and threatening to censor web sites and social media.

This is part of an international phenomenon. In the US, the Trump administration is carrying out a witchhunt against immigrants and seeking to clamp down on Internet access. In Europe, the Spanish government has invoked the autocratic constitution to suppress the democratic rights of the Catalan masses.

In Sri Lanka, the parliament has unanimously voted to create a fake constituent assembly, not to defend democratic rights but to buttress autocratic forms of rule and maintain the communal constitution that enshrines the foremost place for Buddhism and the Sinhala language.

The working class should take the initiative to call for a genuine constituent assembly, directly elected by popular vote, to draft a new constitution that ends all discrimination based on religion, language, caste and sexuality and abolishes all repressive laws and acts.

Build an independent movement of the working class!

A new period of explosive class struggle is opening up. The Sri Lankan working class must break from every faction of the capitalist class and intervene in the crisis with its own independent political program based on international socialism.

The SEP calls for the building of action committees in workplaces, neighbourhoods and plantations. Only by developing its own independent organisations can the working class break out of the straitjacket of the trade unions and wage a political struggle for its fundamental democratic and social rights, in the process rallying the support of the rural masses and youth. The formation of action committees in two plantations in the Hatton area, in response to the SEP's call, shows that broad opportunities exist for building such committees.

To meet the pressing social needs of the masses, the economy must be

reorganised from top to bottom on socialist lines. This requires the nationalisation of the estates, banks, major industries and businesses under the democratic control of the working class. Foreign loans must be repudiated and the crushing debts of peasants abolished.

As Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution predicted, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has, over the past seven decades, proven organically incapable of meeting the democratic aspirations and social needs of the masses. The working class has to assume the leadership of the coming struggles for basic democratic and social rights in the fight for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam and a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

Build the revolutionary party!

The SEP is above all intervening in the election to build the necessary revolutionary leadership in the working class to fight for this political program. The SEP and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), represent the continuation of the struggle for Marxism and the traditions of the Russian Revolution, which in October 1917 established the world's first workers' state.

We call on workers, the rural poor, intellectuals, youth and students to participate in our campaign, support it financially, and read the *World Socialist Web Site*, the organ of the world Trotskyist movement, which provides a Marxist analysis and perspective in the fields of politics, economics, social, arts and culture. We urge workers, rural poor, intellectuals, youth and students to seriously study our program and to join and build the SEP as the necessary mass revolutionary party.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>