

Sri Lankan SEP election meeting discusses working-class response to COVID-19 pandemic

By our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a second online rally last week for the forthcoming 2020 general elections. The party is standing a total of 43 candidates for the Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara Eliya districts in the scheduled August 5 poll.

Around 100 people from Sri Lanka and internationally participated in the event which was streamed on the party's Facebook page. More than 2,000 have since viewed the broadcast with many sharing it and posting greetings, comments and questions, including about the SEP's call for the formation of rank and file committees and the SEP's future work.

The meeting was chaired by SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena who is a candidate for the Colombo district. He explained that the central theme of the SEP election campaign election was the "Fight against war, social catastrophe and dictatorship."

Wijesiriwardena explained that the Sri Lankan president is rapidly militarising his administration in preparation to suppress the mounting working-class opposition to government and employer attacks on wages, jobs and basic democratic rights.

"The so-called opposition United National Party, Samagi Jana Balavegaya, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Tamil National Alliance have not challenged the preparations for presidential dictatorship," he said. "They too are pushing for their own class-war program."

Wijesiriwardena reviewed the disastrous international situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic. "The Rajapakse government's boasting to have defeated the COVID-19 pandemic is false," he said, pointing out that infections had emerged in many parts of the country which indicated the growing danger posed by the virus.

Paramu Thirugnanasampanthar, who heads the SEP list in the Jaffna district, spoke about the pledge made by the Tamil National Alliance [TNA]—the main Tamil bourgeois

party in the North and East of the island—to support Rajapakse, even as the Sri Lankan president prepares for repressive action against all working people.

"The Tamil nationalist parties have continuously bargained for power-sharing agreements with the Colombo government and their attempts have always failed... The democratic rights of Tamil masses can be only won through a unified struggle of Sinhala, Tamil and workers for a socialist program with the support of the international working class," he said.

Dinesh Hemal spoke on behalf of the IYSSE, explaining the disastrous impact of the COVID-19 on children and young people internationally and particularly in South Asia where 240 million children are already living in poverty. UNICEF has predicted that in the next six months another 120 million children will be added to this category, he said.

"Hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their jobs or face wage cuts throughout the world, many of them young with no prospect of finding a decent job," he said. "There is no solution to the problems facing young people within the capitalist system."

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, the last speaker, reviewed the refusal of the capitalist classes in every country to take serious action to stop the spread of COVID-19 and their demands that workers must now return to work in dangerously unsafe conditions.

The actions of the capitalist class, Dias said, are guided by its thirst for profits and are unconcerned about the fate of humanity. This demonstrates that the capitalist system can offer only barbarism and shows the necessity for the working class to replace it with socialism.

The speaker referred to the *World Socialist Web Site* perspective, "The decade of socialist revolution begins," published on January 3, and explained that the COVID-19 pandemic had intensified the crisis of world capitalism and the objective processes that produce mass revolutionary struggles internationally.

Dias said that President Rajapakse and his brother, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, were campaigning to secure a two-thirds parliamentary majority in the election for their Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). This was in order to abolish the 19th constitutional amendment, which nominally pruned some of the powers of the executive presidency, and to rewrite the constitution to give the president even greater anti-democratic powers.

Significant steps had already been taken towards a presidential dictatorship with the insertion of retired and active military officials in central positions in the administration, Dias said. These moves are in preparation for a brutal clamp down on working people and the youth of all communities, who are bound to vehemently resist the government's austerity measures now being imposed amid the spread of the pandemic.

The TNA, the speaker continued, has expressed its willingness to support the government. In an interview with the *Daily Mirror*, TNA spokesman and parliamentarian M.A. Sumanthiran said that, "If the government is ready to fulfill the aspirations of the Tamil people his party is ready to work with the government."

Dias said that the term "Tamil people" is used to hide the real aspirations of the Tamil bourgeoisie which for many decades have craved a deal with Colombo in order to jointly subject both Sinhala and Tamil working class to the ruthless exploitation of finance capital.

The speaker reviewed the deepening economic crisis, growing international debt repayments and falling growth rates in Sri Lanka now being exacerbated by the pandemic. The Rajapakse government has responded to this by giving huge tax concessions to the rich while imposing higher taxes on consumer goods imports that have sent the prices of essential food items through the roof.

Dias explained: "The SEP participates in the election not to cultivate false hopes in the utterly discredited parliament system, which is nothing more than a rubber stamp for all the social counter-revolutionary steps of the executive presidential rule.

"On the contrary, the SEP has advanced an election statement which stresses the need to build action committees in work places and the neighbourhoods of urban and rural poor. These organisations have to be totally independent of every faction of the bourgeoisie, and their left hangers-on, and the trade unions and need to be based on the fight for the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government.

"Such a government would implement a socialist program that incorporates the democratic demands of the oppressed masses and provides viable solutions to the burning issues of defending living conditions and social rights. This must include decent wages and jobs for all those who want to

work, free health services and education, agrarian supplies to the poor farmers at concessionary prices, and the abolition of discrimination on the grounds of language, religion, caste or sex."

Dias referred to the right-wing election intervention of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) that began as a petty-bourgeois party based on a mixture of Che Guevarism and Maoism. In 1971 and 1987, the JVP resorted to extra-parliamentary armed adventures, hoping to work out a political deal with Colombo. Now, under the name Jathika Jana Balaya [National People's Power], this organisation calls for reform and the "cleansing" of parliament, he explained.

In one election statement, JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake declares: "We have presented a group of candidates to bring decency to the parliament. Parliament was full of looters, those engaged in illegal sand mining, owners of public bars and criminals. It must be cleansed. You have got the opportunity to fill the parliament with good persons if you vote for us."

The JVP, Dias told the online meeting, "tries to resurrect parliament at the very time that the bourgeoisie wants to discard it and go for a military-fascist dictatorship, and as working people and youth are looking for an alternative form of rule that can serve their aspirations.

"In different ways, all the pseudo-left groups follow the same rotten political agenda—to prop up crumbling bourgeois rule and, through it, to disarm the working class from taking the necessary political steps to rally the oppressed social layers under its socialist banner in preparation for the overthrow of the decadent capitalist system that can offer only war and barbarism.

"Only the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections throughout the world provide a program and perspective to guide working people and youth for the socialist revolution internationally," Dias said in conclusion.

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