

SEP election campaign in Sri Lanka: Workers denounce establishment parties

By our reporters
25 July 2020

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its youth organisation, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), are conducting a strong intervention in Sri Lanka's national election due to be held on August 5.

The SEP is fielding a total of 43 candidates in three districts—in the capital Colombo, Nuwara Eliya, the central hills plantations district, and in Jaffna, the capital of the war-ravaged Northern Province.

The major capitalist parties contesting the elections—President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, the opposition United National Party (UNP), the Samagi Jana Balavegaya, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) are whipping up Sinhala chauvinism to advance their class-war agenda against all working people. The Tamil and Muslim parties have responded with their own nationalist and communalist rhetoric.

SEP campaigners have widely distributed copies of the party's election manifesto—"Fight for an international socialist program against war, social disaster and dictatorship"—and discussed it with important sections of the working class. Workers and young people have also endorsed the SEP's international campaign against military harassment of the party's Jaffna district candidates and signed a protest petition addressed to the defence secretary, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne.

Last week campaigners visited railway workers' quarters near the main railway workshops at Ratmalana in the suburbs of Colombo. The large workshops have previously been the centre of powerful struggles by workers.

In the 1970s, more than 5,000 people were employed at the facility; today this has been slashed to about 2,000. Only a few hundred workers now live in the workers' quarters which have not been renovated for years because of successive government expenditure cuts.

The Ratmalana workshops were reopened in May, after the government demanded a return-to-work following a two-month COVID-19 lockdown. While workers were concerned and angered by the lack of adequate safety

measures in the facility, the unions fully endorsed the government directive.

Distrustful of the major parliamentary parties, many workshop employees were reluctant at first to speak with SEP campaigners, thinking they were simply after their votes. This changed once the workers realised that SEP campaigners wanted to discuss their working conditions and the party's fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies.

One young worker said: "As a safety measure all workers have their body temperature taken at the workshops but no-one is able to work and maintain social distancing. This means that if one person is infected with the virus, others will also be definitely infected.

"We were previously provided with two masks but now it's only one mask per week. It's very difficult to work for a long time wearing these masks in a warm environment."

Workshop employees, he said, previously did a lot of overtime to supplement their low wages. "Before the pandemic we did 240 hours overtime per month. This has now been cut by a half. While we were previously unable to make ends meet, it is now impossible."

The government promised to reduce loan instalments for several months because of the coronavirus lockdown, he said, but nothing happened. "We are weary of these political parties."

A young motor mechanic, who had come to meet a friend, discussed the wage and job cuts now being imposed by the big companies. Garment manufacturers, he said, are using COVID-19 as a pretext for job cuts. SEP campaigners discussed the worsening conditions facing workers internationally and the necessity of building workers' action committees to fight wage and job cuts and for workplace safety.

After being told about the military harassment of SEP members in the north, he signed the party's petition. About 20 workers, youth and housewives living in the railway quarters also signed.

SEP campaigners also visited the quarters of harbour

workers at Grandpass in central Colombo. Colombo harbour's main container terminals are controlled by foreign companies with most workers employed on contract basis or hired from so-called "manpower companies" on a basic wage and without basic rights or access to a pension fund.

Many of the houses in the more than 50-year-old complex have not been renovated by the harbour authority. Workers suspect that administration is planning to move them into "low income" accommodation elsewhere, and release the valuable land to property developers.

Samanthi is a netball player and works in the sports section of the Colombo port. She said had previously voted for political groups which posed as alternatives to the main capitalist parties. These organisations have "only put more burdens on the people" and said harbour workers are discussing not voting for any party in the election.

"When we were young, we thought the JVP could make a change but that belief faded away because of how they worked in the recent past. They protected the bourgeois governments," she said.

Samanthi spoke about the response of governments worldwide to the coronavirus pandemic: "All governments, including the Trump regime in America, think that the death of the elderly is for their benefit. They don't want to suppress the pandemic but let the poor die. In Sri Lanka the government asks money from the ordinary masses to control COVID-19 but takes nothing from the capitalists."

Kapila, a crane operator, spoke about workers' opposition to the moves to privatise the harbour's eastern terminal. "Discussions on privatisation of the eastern terminal started when [present Prime Minister] Mahinda Rajapakse was president. The previous UNP government signed an agreement to give it to an Indo-Japanese joint venture.

"The current government is talking about renewing the agreement. Whichever government comes to power the eastern terminal will definitely be privatised and many workers will lose jobs," he said.

Kapila said that workers' declining living standards and the moves to privatise the harbour were occurring because of the unions. "They are tied to capitalist political parties," he said.

"When workers start to fight, the government makes promises to the unions but these are never implemented and the bureaucracy is given some sops." After a discussion about the SEP's socialist program he agreed to study the party's election statement and signed the defence petition.

Last week SEP members visited several tea estates in the central plantation district, including Annfield at Dickoya near Hatton.

Rajasekar said Kelani Valley, the company controlling the estate, had tried to implement the new revenue-sharing

system in the division where he worked, but workers opposed it.

Under this highly exploitative system each worker and his or her family is allocated about 1,000 tea bushes to maintain. The company is given the harvested leaves and, after deducting its inputs—expenses for tools, fertilisers and other items—and then after claiming its "profit rate," pays the remaining "income" to the producer.

"This system has already been introduced at some divisions in our estate," he said, "and management is putting pressure on us to accept it. All the union leaders are closely working with the management [in implementing this]."

Rajasekar agreed that workers must break from the trade unions and form action committees to fight against these attacks. He said that whichever government comes to power after August 5, workers problems would not be solved.

D. Kanagaraj, another worker, knew about the SEP's fight for socialist internationalism and remembered its struggle to reinstate S. Balasubramaniam, a victimised local tea estate union leader. The SEP supported the establishment of an Abbotsleigh estate action committee and held a protest in Hatton for his reinstatement.

"I very much appreciate your struggle to reinstate Balasubramaniam. He was suspended because he was in the forefront of the plantation workers' 1,000-rupee wage campaign in 2018. The union did nothing to defend him but now they're claiming that he was reinstated because their fight."

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