

Sri Lankan SEP speaks to Colombo residents about austerity and war

Our correspondents

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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members spoke with residents of the Kotahena Flats in Colombo City last week, winning important support for party candidates in Sri Lanka's forthcoming provincial elections. The SEP is running a slate of 43 candidates, headed by Political Committee member Vilani Peiris, for the Colombo district in the Western Provincial ballot on March 29.

Built in the 1970s, the Kotahena Flats is one of the oldest housing schemes in Colombo and lacks rudimentary facilities. Apart from a small park for children there is no library or other amenities for youth. According to the residents, garbage is collected only once in four days. Most of the flats are in a rundown and dilapidated state, the original dwellings consisting of just three parts: a veranda, a room about 15 x 20 feet and a small kitchen, but no bedrooms. As their families expanded, the residents added extra parts to their homes.

Residents told SEP campaigners that they currently have a temporary reprieve from the Rajapakse government's plans to evict thousands of city residents. The government is in the process of evicting over 70,000 families as part of its attempts to transform Colombo into a major commercial hub in Asia. (See: "Sri Lankan chief justice backs Colombo evictions")

SEP members distributed hundreds of copies of the party's election manifesto—"Fight for a socialist program against war, austerity and police state methods!"—and discussed with residents the growing danger of a third world war and the Sri Lankan government's social austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights. Workers, youth and housewives listened intently as SEP members explained the party's analysis and socialist program.

Under conditions of a virtual media blackout on these

vital issues, most residents had no idea about the dangers of a new imperialist war posed by the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia"—a political and military strategy to encircle China—or the crisis triggered by the US-backed coup in Ukraine involving fascist organisations.

A young telecommunications worker said: "I had no idea about a world war before you explained this to me. As you said, the media and other political parties do not discuss this issue. I can't imagine what would happen to the world's people if a war broke out."

The young workers also had no clear understanding of the political significance of the current US campaign over Sri Lankan war crimes and human right violations, and falsely believed that Sri Lankans should defend the Rajapakse administration against Washington's so-called "human rights" campaign.

SEP campaigners explained that the US push was not motivated by any concern over human rights but aimed at pressuring Colombo to fully support Obama's "pivot" to Asia. The Rajapakse government's anti-imperialist posturing against the US—denouncing Washington's bogus human rights campaign—was an attempt to deflect and divert popular opposition to the government's social austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

Clarified by this analysis, the young worker said: "I think that's correct. You've helped me to understand what is really happening."

A retired dock worker said: "If a world war broke out the whole world be destroyed because they have nuclear weapons that can be fired thousands miles away from the targeted countries." The worker used to vote for the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which leads ruling United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA), but in the last elections supported the opposition United

National Party (UNP) as a protest against the rising cost of living.

“I’ve decided not to vote for any party in this election because all of them are cheating people. They only come around during election period and make various promises but after the election you cannot find them.”

SEP members explained that it was not enough to boycott the elections. Working people needed an independent political movement based on international socialist perspective to fight against the Rajapakse government’s social austerity measures and attack on democratic rights.

Another harbour worker said: “I’d decided to boycott the vote but you’re the only ones who explain to people the real political situation. I’m happy now that I have someone to vote.

“I’ve not seen a government like this in my life time,” he continued. “Even during the war [against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)] we didn’t suffer like this. At that time we were afraid of bomb blasts now we always live in fear. You cannot speak out against the government because they will abduct you, accusing you of being a part of the ‘international conspiracy.’ Now even if you strike for your rights you’re labelled as a supporter of ‘international conspiracy.’”

A school teacher commented on plans by the US and other western powers to move a war crimes resolution against Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC): “This is from the same America and Britain which supported the war. They’re bringing this resolution for their own interests not for defending human rights.”

A Tamil housewife noted that five years since end of the war against the separatist LTTE the government had failed to stop the rising cost of living despite, promising to do so in several elections. “Instead, it’s carrying out a propaganda campaign about the re-emergence of LTTE activities to make people afraid and use that against those who criticise and oppose government.”

The housewife referred to the recent detention of Tamil widow and human rights campaigner Balendran Jeyakumari and her 13-year-old daughter in Kilinochchi in northern Sri Lanka. Jeyakumari was arrested on trumped-up charges of “harbouring an ex-LTTE” cadre. “The government has punished a family which

has lost everything during the war,” she said.

The housewife recalled how she had been protected by her Sinhala neighbours during the anti-Tamil racist pogroms in July 1983 that marked the onset of the protracted civil war. “Several people were killed in the road and several houses were burnt [in 1983]. The government is trying to create such a situation again,” she said.



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