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Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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Sri Lankan SEP to run candidates in local government elections

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is contesting the local government elections to be held on March 9.

The SEP is fielding 53 candidates for three local government bodies—the Kolonnawa Urban Council in Colombo district, the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in Nuwaraeliya district in the central plantations, and the Karainagar Pradeshiya Sabha in the Jaffna district.



Vilani Peiris, Myilvaganam Thevarajah and Thirugnana Sampanthar [Photo: WSWS]

Our candidate lists are headed by leading members of the party's Political Committee and decades-long fighters for socialist internationalism: Vilani Peiris, Myilvaganam Thevarajah and Thirugnana Sampanthar, respectively.

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The SEP is the only party in Sri Lanka that fights for the unified mobilisation of the working class based on international socialism and against the communal divisions whipped up by sections of the ruling class.

Our election campaign aims to build an independent movement of the working class, rallying the rural poor and other oppressed layers, against the intensifying danger of imperialist war, Colombo's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights. We stand for the establishment of a government of workers and peasants, committed to socialist policies, as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

The local government elections are being held as bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka confronts an immense economic and political crisis as a part of a deepening global breakdown of capitalism, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine that threatens a global conflagration.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) government regime, like the regime of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, has turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout loan. It is now implementing a brutal IMF-dictated program that includes deep cuts in government expenditure, major income tax increases for hundreds of thousands of workers, the slashing of price subsidies, privatisations and massive state sector job cuts.

The eruption of mass struggles in April–July last year saw millions of workers demand the resignation of Rajapakse and his government, and an end to inflation, shortages of essentials and extended power cuts. While Rajapakse was forced to flee the country and then resign, he was replaced with the discredited United National Party leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, a long-time US stooge. Wickremesinghe came to power because the trade unions, backed by the pseudo-lefts including the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), betrayed workers' strikes and demonstrations, diverting them into calls for an interim capitalist regime.

The government's attacks on wages, conditions, jobs and social rights have provoked a new wave of nationwide struggles involving tens of thousands of workers in the telecom, post, banking, health, railways and plantation sectors. On January 23, thousands of port workers protested in Colombo demanding higher wages to counteract rising inflation and an end to huge income tax rises. This is part of a growing wave of strikes and industrial action unfolding internationally.

Even as it escalates its war against Russia, Washington is intensifying military preparations for war against China, risking a catastrophic third world war involving

nuclear-armed powers. While the US and India are pressuring Colombo to more closely integrate its military into their war drive against China, Beijing is seeking to boost its influence and counteract these moves.

The Wickremesinghe regime has made repeated attempts to postpone the local government elections, fearing that widespread popular opposition will be expressed in a humiliating electoral defeat. Although the local election results will not directly threaten the national government, it is concerned that any defeat in the polls will further intensify the political crisis and undermine its ability to push through the IMF measures. Last-minute moves to block the polls cannot be ruled out.

The main opposition parliamentary parties, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led National People's Power (NPP), have opposed any postponement of the local government polls. They seek to use a victory in the local elections to push for a general election, each hoping to form a new national government.

Hoping to exploit the rising popular anger against the Wickremesinghe-SLPP government, the SJB and JVP/NPP pose as defenders of democratic rights and opponents of the social calamity facing the masses. Their posturing is bogus. Both have no fundamental differences with the government's economic policies or its IMF-dictated program. Any future government formed by these parties will be as harsh as the current regime and will just as readily resort to state repression against the inevitable popular opposition.

The SJB previously criticised the former Rajapakse government for not approaching the IMF sooner and boasted that "international donors have confidence" in it.

Under conditions where the major parties of the Colombo establishment have been politically discredited among the masses, the JVP/NPP presents itself to the ruling elite, big business and the upper-middle class as the best means to save bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka. Last October, JVP/NPP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake told *Suwarnawahini*, a private TV channel, that his party was "an exemplary group" that could make "people bear the cost" of the IMF measures.

The discredited and divided Tamil bourgeois parties are also maneuvering to hoodwink the masses while supporting the IMF program as the only way of solving the economic crisis. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has split. Its main party, the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Katchchi (ITAK), is separately contesting the local government elections. Its other constituents, including the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam and the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation, have accused ITAK of sidelining them.

These parties all hope to secure some sort of power-sharing arrangement with Colombo, thereby securing special privileges for the Tamil elite at the expense of Tamil-speaking workers, youth, and the rural poor. They all support the US-India war drive against China, and in doing so aim to enlist Washington's assistance in pressuring Colombo for a power-sharing arrangement.

The various pseudo-left parties, including the FSP, are playing a treacherous role in blocking an independent political movement of the working class by keeping them trapped within the reactionary parliamentary framework. The FSP is fielding candidates in several local government districts. It fraudulently claims to be "socialist" and to "oppose" the IMF program.

The FSP declares that it is campaigning for *Jana Sabha* (People's Councils) in every part of the country to pressure parliament and the government to implement programs in support of the people. This is yet another attempt to tie working people to the political establishment and block any independent movement of the working class against capitalist rule.

In opposition to all these parties, the SEP is calling on workers and rural toilers to form action committees at every workplace, factory, plantation, neighbourhood and rural area, independent of all the bourgeois parties and the unions, in order to take the fight for their basic social needs and democratic rights into their own hands. The SEP is campaigning for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on these action committees to spearhead the struggle to establish a government of workers and peasants to implement socialist policies.

The SEP will issue an election manifesto outlining the party's program and perspective for the working class in the coming days and will hold online and outdoor meetings to explain our policies. We urge all workers, youths, rural toilers and progressive-minded intellectuals to support and join our campaign.

The party has also launched a 700,000-rupee (\$US1,920) election fund and calls for generous support. We are fighting to establish the necessary revolutionary leadership in the working class, which means building the SEP as a mass revolutionary party. We urge all those agree with our perspective and program to join the SEP and take forward this political struggle.

To contact the SEP to join and help our campaign:

E-mail: wswscmb@sltnet.lk

Phone: +94773562327

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sep.lk>

Donations to our election fund can be deposited here:

Account number: 1472834301

Name of account holder: Socialist Equality Party, Commercial Bank, Kirulapone

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