

Victory of international defense campaign strengthens Tamil struggle

The SEP and the fight for the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam

The WSWs Editorial Board
1 December 1998

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka has been able to confirm reports that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have released all the SEP members in their custody.

Thirugnana Sambandan, Kasinathan Naguleswaran and Rajendran Sudharshan were freed September 13 after almost 50 days in captivity. Rasarapnam Rajavale was released September 16 after 17 days' detention. All four SEP members are in good health. None was tortured or otherwise physically abused during their interrogation by the LTTE.

The release of the SEP members is an important victory for democratic rights and strengthens the struggle of the Tamils of Sri Lanka and Eelam against state discrimination and national oppression.

This outcome would not have been possible but for the international defense campaign mounted by the SEP, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), and the *World Socialist Web Site*. In mounting this campaign, the ICFI rejected direct warnings that a public campaign to secure the release of the SEP members would result in their deaths. The ICFI was confident that the LTTE would not ignore the pressure of progressive and socialist public opinion, that it could not simply dismiss international outrage over the persecution of principled proponents of socialist internationalism.

Ultimately, the LTTE made the politically astute decision to pull back from a course fraught with dangers for itself and the Tamil struggle. Had the LTTE persisted with its campaign of repression against the SEP, it would have gravely damaged, if not poisoned, relations between the Tamil national movement and the working class in the South of the island for years to come.

The SEP and ICFI wish to thank all those human rights and labor organizations and concerned individuals, in South Asia and around the world, who pressed the LTTE to release the SEP members unconditionally or, at the very least, immediately acknowledge their arrest and accord them the minimum protections due all detainees. We are especially grateful to the many Tamils on the island, in the Indian state of Tamilnad and among the Tamil-émigré communities of Australia, Europe and North America who urged the LTTE to cease its campaign of repression against the SEP. They did so because they recognized that the suppression of the working class party that has fought to unite the Tamil and Sinhalese masses against the Sri Lankan state and its war only undermined the Tamil national struggle and strengthened the People's Alliance government.

Nevertheless, continued vigilance in regards to the democratic rights of the SEP and the civil rights of its members and supporters is necessary. Neither the LTTE leadership in exile, nor the authorities in the LTTE-occupied parts of the Vanni, have provided any assurance that the LTTE

will not henceforth interfere with the SEP's democratic right to present its program to the Tamil masses.

The program of the SEP

The international campaign against the LTTE's suppression of its socialist political opponents has prompted a growing number of inquiries, especially from supporters of the Tamil national struggle, as to the SEP's evaluation of the LTTE, our strategy for vanquishing national oppression, our history and program.

The Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, the SEP, fights to forge a revolutionary alliance of the working class and peasantry—Sinhalese and Tamil—to establish the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam. Neither the democratic nor the social aspirations of the masses can be realized under the rule of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie or within the confines of the nation-state system erected on the Indian subcontinent in 1947-48. The backwardness of Sri Lanka and Eelam—the product of their colonial past and continued imperialist domination—will be overcome only through the establishment of a workers and peasants government and as part of the world socialist revolution.

Throughout the 15-year-long war that the Sri Lankan state has waged to perpetuate the subjugation of the Tamils, the SEP has maintained a position of revolutionary defeatism. It demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan security forces from the North and East.

The SEP's stand against the war is pivotal to its fight to free the working class from the political domination of the bourgeoisie and transform it into a self-conscious revolutionary force capable of assuming the leadership of all the oppressed. The war has been a tragedy not just for the Tamil masses of the North and East, who have borne the brunt of the fighting. It has been used by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie as a smokescreen for a systematic assault on the democratic rights and living standards of the masses in the South and to propagate its Sinhala-chauvinist ideology.

Just in recent months, the People's Alliance (PA) regime has invoked the war as justification for indefinitely postponing provincial council elections, extending emergency rule throughout the island, and imposing military censorship on all reporting of military-police operations. The latter measure makes it legally impossible to publicly document and expose the widening use of security forces to suppress social unrest in the south. The PA government has also imposed another wage cut on

government workers—dressed up as a voluntary contribution to the war effort. With the assistance of the labor bureaucracy, which repeats its argument that it is “inopportune” for workers to press their demands at a time of “national crisis,” the PA now seeks to extend wage austerity to all private sector workers.

The SEP’s opposition to the war does not imply any measure of support for the national-separatist program of the LTTE. The SEP warns the Tamil masses of the North and East that the LTTE in no way articulates their genuine aspirations or interests. In those parts of Eelam currently under its control, the LTTE administration has connived with the capitalists who control transport and retail trade to make the workers and peasants pay for any financial losses resulting from the war, and it has shown no more respect for the democratic rights of the masses than has the Sri Lankan state. Were a Tamil state to be established it would be, like the present Sri Lankan state, a capitalist state, subservient to the dictates of global capital.

In fighting to mobilize the masses in the South against the war and the People’s Alliance regime, the SEP is in no way deterred by the argument that the LTTE would exploit a working class-led, mass movement against the war to consolidate its rule in the North and East. The unity of the oppressed Sinhalese and Tamil masses cannot be forged by upholding the territorial integrity of the reactionary Sri Lankan state.

Were the war to end as a result of the independent action of the working class, class dynamics on the island would be radically transformed. Whatever the immediate military outcome, a successful working class mobilization against the war would create immeasurably more favorable conditions for uniting the Sinhalese and Tamil workers and for forging an alliance of the working class and the petty-bourgeois masses, urban and rural, Sinhalese and Tamil. By forcing an end to the war, the working class would stake its claim to be the true agent of the liberation of the Tamil masses and the leader of an alternative social regime.

The prospect of a workers and peasants government coming to power in Colombo would accentuate and lay bare the class antagonisms within Eelam, thus greatly facilitating the exposure of the LTTE and its separatist program. While the Tamil workers would see the action of their class brothers in the South as opening the door to the realization of both their democratic and class aspirations through the establishment of a Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam, the Tamil bourgeoisie would share their Sinhalese rivals’ fear for their power and property. Without any fear of contradiction, we can say that under such conditions the creation of a Tamil state in the North and the East would become the rallying point for reaction, winning the support of imperialism and even large sections of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie.

“Self-determination” in the light of history

The LTTE and their supporters among a myriad of pseudo-socialist groups claim that any opposition—including the SEP’s—to the establishment of a Tamil Eelam nation-state constitutes a denial of the Tamils’ “right to self-determination.” To equate the opposition of the working class to a particular political program with the opposition of reaction is an old canard, frequently employed by the national bourgeoisie to prevent the working class from exercising its political self-determination, from advancing its own class alternative. The truth is that the essential progressive content of “self-determination”—the eradication of national oppression—can be realized only through the SEP’s program for the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

The national question has long vexed the Marxist movement. Great events, however, have served to clarify the relationship between the struggle to realize national-democratic and socialist demands and the

validity of calls for national “self-determination.”

Whereas nationalists depict the nation as an eternal category or the optimum stage of human development, Marxists insist that nations are an historical product. Through national movements and the erection of nation-states, the rising bourgeoisie in Western Europe and North America asserted its control over a home market and destroyed the feudal social relations and survivals that blocked the development of capitalism.

Self-determination came to be included in the program of the Bolshevik Party and later the Communist International at a time when modern capitalist relations were only emerging in the vast parts of the world then subject to direct colonial rule, as in the case of India, or semi-colonial exploitation, such as in China and Iran.

In tsarist Russia, an empire ruled by a feudal autocracy and containing numerous national-ethnic groups at radically divergent stages of economic development, the Bolsheviks raised the slogan of self-determination as a means of overcoming the animosities tsarist oppression had incited among the workers of different nations and to combat the poisonous influence of the bourgeois nationalists who sought to exploit popular opposition to Great Russian chauvinism to further their own class interests.

The right of self-determination, insisted Lenin, was a “negative” demand—that did not imply support for national separatism as a preferred course of action—but rather expressed the Bolsheviks’ opposition to the tsarist regime’s use of military might to keep any oppressed nationality within its empire.

Subsequently, the meaning of self-determination was perverted by the Stalinists and other falsifiers of Marxism to mean blanket support for every national demand. Today, advocacy of self-determination is invariably perceived as support for the establishment of a separate state.

Lenin and the socialists of his day were acutely aware of imperialist manipulation of the plight of small nationalities and their national demands. In respect to the Balkans, the socialist movement counterposed to the nationalists’ drive to carve out tiny ethnic states through successive waves of bloodletting the perspective of the Socialist United States of the Balkans. Only the genuine democratic unification of the Balkans through the revolutionary action of the working class and oppressed masses could create a state structure that would make possible both the overcoming of national frictions and the development of a modern industrial economy.

The great Polish Marxist Rosa Luxemburg, for her part, raised farsighted objections to the slogan of self-determination, warning that it was invariably exploited by the national bourgeoisie to secure its own class aims. The right of self-determination postulates the existence of a national will, but, as Luxemburg observed, such a will does not exist outside or above the class struggle, but rather is its product.

Permanent Revolution

In the decades preceding and immediately following the Second World War, the national question was bound up with great anti-colonial movements. These movements, which united disparate peoples, divided by religion, language, caste or tribe, had a profound democratic and anti-imperialist content. But even when national unification was bound up with freedom from colonial or semi-colonial bondage, the elimination of pre-capitalist forms of exploitation, and the establishment of large political-economic units capable of serving as the basis for the rapid development of a modern economy, the class dynamic of the national question was radically different in Asia and Africa from what it had been in Western Europe and North America in the nineteenth century. With the development of imperialism and the emergence of the proletariat as a revolutionary rival to the bourgeoisie, the national bourgeoisie grew

evermore impotent and reactionary. That which was historically progressive and necessary in the national-democratic revolution could no longer be achieved under the political leadership of the bourgeoisie.

Herein lay the significance of Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution. In countries with a belated capitalist development the essential tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution—the liquidation of pre-capitalist forms of exploitation and oppression and democratic national unification and equality—can be realized only in struggle against the national bourgeoisie and through a revolutionary alliance of the oppressed masses, led by the working class, and linked to the anti-capitalist struggle of the world proletariat.

The struggle against national oppression does not thereby lose any of its significance or urgency. But with the establishment of a revolutionary alliance of the oppressed under the leadership of the working class it is subsumed, like all the other democratic tasks, in the struggle for a new social order against the national bourgeoisie and imperialism.

Conversely, national liberation is a political chimera insofar as it is separated from social liberation. While supporting the struggles of the Indian, Chinese and other colonial peoples for their national independence, Trotsky, writing on behalf of the Fourth International in 1940, warned: "Belated national states can no longer count upon an independent democratic development. Surrounded by decaying capitalism and enmeshed in imperialist contradictions, the independence of a backward state will inevitably be semi-fictitious, and its political regime, under the influence of internal class contradictions and external pressure, will unavoidably fall into dictatorship against the people—such is the regime of the 'People's' party in Turkey, the Kuomintang in China; Gandhi's regime will be similar tomorrow in India."

This perspective has been tragically vindicated by the whole post-Second World War experience of decolonization in which the great colonial empires were wound up and political power transferred to regimes of the native bourgeoisie. In assuming state power, the national bourgeoisie functioned not as the liberator of the oppressed masses, but as a junior partner in imperialist plunder. The newly independent bourgeois regimes pursued "national development schemes" which neither liquidated the survivals of pre-capitalist forms of oppression, nor broke their countries' dependence on a handful of natural resource and agricultural exports. These schemes, which generally were dressed up as "socialism," did serve, however, to divert scarce resources to a grasping and venal bourgeoisie.

Nowhere did decolonization provide the basis for a genuine solution to the problem of national oppression. On the contrary, the new states of Asia and Africa were founded on a perversion of fundamental democratic principles, for they were erected on the political units that had been established by colonial brigandry and imperialist wars and diplomacy. In no way did their state boundaries correspond with national-ethnic or geographic frontiers, let alone the democratic will of the masses. Incapable of meeting and hostile to the aspirations of the masses, the regimes of the national bourgeoisie have upheld democratic rights in the breach and used communal, tribal and national-ethnic tensions to derail social unrest and wage internecine struggles for power and privilege.

The classic example of decolonization was the transfer of political power in the Indian subcontinent from British imperialism to the national bourgeois regimes of India, Pakistan and Ceylon. During the first half of the twentieth century the Indian subcontinent was rocked by a powerful anti-imperialist movement that was principally propelled by worker and peasant social discontent. But because it remained under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie, this mighty upsurge ended in a settlement with British imperialism that saw India partitioned along communal lines into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu India—thus perpetuating and exacerbating communal divisions—and an accommodation with landlordism and casteism. The Indian National Congress abandoned its own program of a

united India and accepted partition because its class composition and outlook made it recoil from the only means of forging the unity of the Hindu and Muslim peasants and workers—their united mobilization against their common landlord, moneylender and capitalist oppressors.

Today, after a half-century of national bourgeois rule, the degradation of the Indian masses is even greater than that which prevailed under the British Raj. Some 320 million Indians live in absolute poverty—i.e., they lack the daily caloric intake needed to support a full day's labor; 186 million people lack access to clean water and close to 650 million lack access to sanitary facilities. As the social crisis has deepened in recent decades, the bourgeoisie has relied ever more on manipulating caste, communal, and linguistic divisions. On three occasions India has gone to war with Pakistan, and last May India's government, now led by the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party, exploded nuclear devices in preparation for the nuclearization of India's military. This was followed by a reciprocal nuclear test by Pakistan.

Unlike the Indian bourgeoisie, which countenanced certain mass movements to press for an end to British rule, the bourgeoisie of Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) had no association whatsoever with a struggle against imperialism. It clung to Ceylon's political separation from the mainland as a means of preventing radical influences from India crossing the Palk Strait and of thwarting the militant Ceylonese workers' efforts to unite with their Indian brothers. Having had state power bequeathed to it by the British in 1948, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie promptly set out to base its rule on communalism, to incite the new state's Sinhalese majority against the Tamil minority. With the acquiescence of the Tamil political elite, the first parliament of "independent" Ceylon stripped the highland Tamil plantation workers of their citizenship rights. The 1949 Citizenship Bill laid the groundwork for all subsequent attacks on the democratic rights of the Tamils of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

The crisis of working class leadership and the emergence of the LTTE

The LTTE can hardly claim that the Tamils of the North and East have always or even long sought to establish an independent state. Rather Tamil separatism batted off the crisis in working class leadership precipitated by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's (LSSP) break with the Fourth International and repudiation of the program of Permanent Revolution.

In the post-independence period, Ceylon was unique in that the Trotskyist movement was in the leadership of the working class. Beginning with the 1948 struggle over the Tamil plantation workers' citizenship rights, the fight to uphold the democratic rights of the Tamils in the new state and oppose Sinhalese chauvinism was directly associated with the working class and its leadership, the then Trotskyist LSSP. That the Tamil masses perceived the working class as the force that could secure their democratic rights was materially demonstrated in the 1953 hartal (general strike) and the 21 Demands movement of 1963-64.

The nationalist degeneration of the LSSP, however, fundamentally disrupted the relationship between the Tamil struggle and the workers movement, creating conditions in which the Tamil masses could be drawn into the train of bourgeois nationalist politics. In 1964, after a decade of accommodation to the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie's national development project, the LSSP consummated its break with Trotskyism by entering into a governmental coalition with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), whose founder, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, had spearheaded the successful agitation for Sinhalese to be made the sole official language. In 1972, during its second coalition with the SLFP, the LSSP played a leading role in the adoption of a constitution that affirmed the privileged status of

Sinhalese and made Buddhism the state religion.

Believing they had been abandoned by the working class, large sections of the Tamil masses sought new means of resisting national oppression in the wake of the LSSP's capitulation to Sinhalese chauvinism. This ultimately led in the 1970s to the emergence of the LTTE and like-minded Tamil nationalist groups from among the student youth of the Jaffna Peninsula.

A second major factor in the emergence of Tamil separatism was the role of Stalinism in Sri Lanka and internationally. Long before the LSSP, the Communist Party of Ceylon had sought to subordinate the working class to Bandaranaike and his SLFP, which it termed the representative of the "progressive" or "anti-imperialist" bourgeoisie. This was the Sri Lankan variant of the two-stage theory of revolution—the Menshevik-Stalinist conception that until the national bourgeoisie completes the democratic revolution, the working class must accept its leadership.

Of even greater significance was the role played by the counterrevolutionary Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy. Within the context of the Cold War, the USSR encouraged and manipulated various national movements as a means of exerting pressure on imperialism. The bureaucracy's support for such movements was always subordinated to its search for a *modus vivendi* with imperialism. The withdrawal of Soviet support for the Eritrean national struggle and subsequent military backing to the Mengistu regime in its efforts to maintain the old borders of the Ethiopian empire is just one flagrant example of how Moscow's support for various national movements was motivated by crude calculations of advantage within the realm of great power politics. Nonetheless, the Soviet bureaucracy's promotion of nationalism served to endow the perspective of national liberation, as a stage both separate and apart from the struggle for world socialism, with a certain historical legitimacy and even revolutionary ethos.

Recognizing that it was the betrayal of the LSSP that had led to the fracturing of the Tamil national struggle from the class struggle of the proletariat, and mindful of Stalinism's pernicious promotion of nationalism, the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the SEP, intervened among the Tamil youth groups that emerged in response to the 1972 constitution and the imposition of racist quotas on university admissions. While these groups exhibited great militancy and readiness for sacrifice, they remained tied to the class politics of the Tamil elite and in their early years worked closely with what was then the principal political organization of the Tamil bourgeoisie, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).

In the latter half of the 1970s, particularly after the United National Party (UNP), which returned to power in 1977, had mounted new attacks on the Tamils, the LTTE and the other Tamil youth groups grew more radical in their rhetoric and tactics. Following a path well trodden by bourgeois national movements, they turned to other bourgeois states (in this case India) and the Soviet and Chinese Stalinist bureaucracies for support. Moreover, to rally support from the Tamil workers and peasants, whose social demands they had hitherto ignored, and to curry favor with the Stalinists, the LTTE and the other radical Tamil nationalist groups now proclaimed themselves "socialist."

Yet never did these groups take up the cause of the Tamil plantation workers, nor did their national project challenge the sanctity of the imperialist-imposed Palk Strait border. In raising this, we don't mean to suggest that a scheme for a "Greater Tamilnad" (a state encompassing the Tamil speakers of both the island and south India) would be a more progressive or viable goal. What it illustrates is the continuity in the aims and aspirations of the LTTE and the other Tamil separatist groups with the traditional, exclusivist politics of the Tamil bourgeois elite of the North and East.

Exclusivism in the name of national liberation—the new national movements

The LTTE was one of many new national movements that arose in the 1970s and 1980s to press, in the name of self-determination, for the dismembering of the "decolonized" states of Asia and Africa. Considering only India, in the past two decades secessionist agitations have rocked the Punjab, Kashmir and the Northeast, including the Assamese, Gurkhas, and the Bodos and other tribal peoples.

Whereas the historic national movements advocated the unification of diverse peoples in struggle against colonialism, these new national movements have made ethno-linguistic and religious differences the basis of their demands for the creation of new states.

Because of deep-rooted socioeconomic and national grievances, these exclusivist movements have won popular support and even inspired heroic sacrifices. But the putrefaction of the historic national movements and the nation-states they established does not validate the program of national ethnic-linguistic and religious separatism. Rather, it underscores the urgency of the Trotskyist perspective of Permanent Revolution and demonstrates the farsightedness of the Trotskyists of the Indian subcontinent who insisted in 1947-48 that the newly-created states of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka were in a fundamental historical sense unviable, for they were the product of the abortion, not victory, of the democratic revolution.

In South Asia, no more than in the Balkans or Africa, can the myriad national-ethnic groups be disentangled and made to conform to nation-state boundaries. To attempt to do so is to open the door to unending demands for partition—demands, moreover, which are inevitably manipulated by the imperialist powers—and to sanction horrific bloodletting.

A democratic and lasting resolution to the problem of national oppression and frictions will be realized only as part of a struggle for a higher social order, for the liquidation of capitalism and the nation-state system in which it is historically rooted.

The decay of the historic national movements and the emergence of a new wave of separatist movements are rooted in major changes in political economy.

The global integration of production has undercut the economic imperative that underlay the conflict between the national bourgeoisie in the countries with a belated capitalist development and imperialism. As long as productive capital remained organized largely within the nation-state framework, political control of the nation-state provided the emerging national bourgeoisie with an important means of resisting imperialist pressure and asserting control over the home market. Globalization and the resulting decline in the significance of these national markets, however, have compelled bourgeois national regimes—from India to Mexico and Argentina—to abandon their traditional national economic strategies. Now the various national bourgeois regimes seek to secure their interests by removing all impediments to international capital exploiting their countries' human and natural resources.

While the new global economic relations have shattered the anti-imperialist pretensions of the traditional bourgeois national movements, they have also provided the objective basis for the emergence of a new type of national movement which seeks to dismember existing states so that regionally-based elites can establish their own ties to international capital. This is true not only in the countries oppressed by imperialism. Significant separatist movements have arisen in some of the oldest bourgeois nation-states, including Canada, Italy and Britain.

"In India and China," wrote the ICFI in a recent statement, "the national movement posed the progressive task of uniting disparate peoples in a common struggle against imperialism—a task which proved unrealizable under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. This new form of nationalism promotes separatism along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines for the benefit of local exploiters. Such movements have nothing to do with the struggle against imperialism, nor do they in any way embody

the democratic aspirations of the masses of oppressed. They serve to divide the working class and divert the class struggle into ethno-communal warfare” (Globalization and the International Working Class: A Marxist Assessment, p. 109).

The record of the LTTE

Over the course of a quarter century, the radical Tamil nationalist groups that arose as an alternative to the constitutionalist politics of the Federalist Party and TULF have demonstrated their organic incapacity to free the Tamils of Eelam from national oppression, let alone provide any solution to the burning social problems of the Tamil masses.

The Eelam Peoples Democratic Party (EPDP), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), Peoples Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), and the other nationalist groups rival to the LTTE have all cast their lot with the Sri Lankan state and bourgeoisie. Today they function as auxiliary detachments of the Sri Lankan security forces in the struggle to bring the Tamils of the North and East under Colombo’s control.

The LTTE, meanwhile, for all its declamations about the self-determination of the Tamils, continues to base its struggle on maneuvers with sections of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, the Indian government and the imperialist powers. More than 10 years after Prabakaran, the LTTE’s top leader, claimed to have been tricked into signing the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, the LTTE still looks to the regime in New Delhi as potential liberators of the Tamils, and is ever anxious to boost the Indian bourgeoisie’s claims to be South Asia’s regional power. Whereas once the LTTE touted a nationalist economic strategy under the guise of “socialism,” today it advocates that an independent Tamil Eelam emulate the East Asian “tigers” and serve as a cheap labor haven for investors. The class logic of the LTTE’s politics—to say nothing of its financial dependence on wealthy capitalist émigrés—inexorably leads it into political relations that make a mockery of the sacrifices of its cadre. In 1994 the LTTE supported the election of the current PA regime; today, it hopes to “internationalize” the Tamil-Sri Lankan conflict by drawing in the imperialist-dominated United Nations.

For the Sinhalese masses, the LTTE has nothing but contempt and hostility. Increasingly, it has resorted to bombings and armed attacks on Sinhalese workers and other civilians in the South. Such wanton acts of terror serve only to strengthen Sinhalese chauvinism by casting the Tamil people’s struggle in ethnic-communal terms and victimizing the Sinhalese oppressed for the crimes of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

In recent years, the LTTE has suffered significant military reverses, including losing control of Jaffna in 1996. But it is quite possible, given the crisis of the People’s Alliance regime and the growing popular hostility to the war in the South, that the LTTE will once again be able to take the offensive. New military victories would inevitably lead to renewed pressure from the LTTE leadership for international recognition—that is, sanction from the world’s great powers—for a Tamil nation-state, and to calls from the imperialist powers, who fear the destabilizing impact of challenges to the existing state system, for the LTTE to come to the bargaining table.

How the demand for Tamil Eelam would then be realized has already been foreshadowed by the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of 1987. The US, Britain, other imperialist powers and the Indian bourgeoisie would convene a “peace” conference and supervise the carving out of a Tamil state. As a condition for their blessing for such a settlement, they would extract economic and geo-political guarantees from both Colombo and the LTTE leadership, while jockeying among themselves for power and influence in the two states.

Inevitably, the delineation of a new border and the divvying up of the island’s assets and resources would further inflame Sinhalese and Tamil tensions—tensions which imperialism would exploit to its advantage. The end result would be the creation of rival, militarized states, each pockmarked with national and communal divisions. The LTTE’s invocation of Hindu mythology and outright violence toward non-Hindus has already profoundly alienated the Tamil-speaking Muslims and Christians and fueled the rise, in the largely Muslim Eastern Province, of a bourgeois separatist party, presently allied with the People’s Alliance, that demands the creation of a separate state for Muslims. In Jaffna, the only Muslims and Sinhalese-speakers who remain are those in the Sri Lankan military. Were the LTTE to succeed in carving out its Tamil state, the Sinhalese chauvinists would, for their part, seek to wreak vengeance on the Tamil minority in the South, using them as scapegoats for the collapse of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie’s war policy.

This is not a matter of speculation. Time and again over the past half-century, the working class and oppressed masses have witnessed the leaders of bourgeois “liberation” movements exchange their guerrilla fatigues for business suits and accept imperialist brokered settlements in which, for a share of political power, they become the guarantors of imperialist investments and interests. The African National Congress, Sein Fein and the Irish Republican Army, and the Palestine Liberation Organization are only the most outstanding examples of this process in the 1990s.

We defy the LTTE to outline an alternative scenario for the realization of its program. Is it not a fact that the LTTE leadership has no greater aspiration than to secure international recognition for a Tamil Eelam state? Hostile to a perspective based on the mobilization of the international working class, is not the LTTE’s armed struggle a means of arriving at a new relationship with the Sri Lankan and international bourgeoisie?

In many respects, the LTTE’s history of protracted armed struggle and bitter reverses most closely resembles that of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The PLO enjoyed mass popular support and was associated with heroic sacrifices, but its politics have always been those of a bourgeois national movement whose greatest fear is that the national liberation struggle should escape its control and become fused with a socialist struggle aimed at rooting out all forms of oppression and exploitation. Its entry into the Oslo “peace” accord was conditioned by two factors: its fear of the growing militancy of the intifada and the collapse of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, which had served for it and various bourgeois Arab regimes as a counterweight to imperialist pressure. In the past, the PLO leadership issued all manner of anti-imperialist manifestos; today its Palestinian Authority defends the property and profits of a thin layer of bourgeois while conniving with the American CIA and the Zionist state to quell popular unrest.

We challenge the LTTE leadership to explain how a Tamil Eelam created under its auspices would be any more progressive or in any way lead to greater improvements in the conditions of the masses than has the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and the West Bank.

How would the secession of the northern and eastern provinces and the erection of a second capitalist state on the island provide a basis for a genuine democratic solution to the problem of the coexistence of the Tamils and Sinhalese of Sri Lanka and Eelam? How would the creation of Tamil Eelam provide a basis for overcoming the dire social problems that confront the Tamil workers and peasants who would comprise the vast majority of its citizens? Will workers wages be raised? Will peasants receive higher prices for their products on world commodity markets? Will the social and cultural level of the masses be raised?

With the collapse of the Asian economic “miracle,” the prospects for the development of a tiny, impoverished state have grown still bleaker. But far from having any program to combat the impact of a world capitalist

depression on the livelihood of the masses, the LTTE has embraced the East Asian development “model.”

To raise these questions is not to deny the self-sacrifice of the LTTE’s cadres. Our purpose, rather, is to point to the logic of political programs and class relations. While the LTTE leadership claims to speak on behalf of the Tamil people as a whole, by virtue of its program, history and class composition it is a political instrument of the Tamil bourgeoisie, which itself is connected with, and subservient to, imperialism.

Sympathy for the plight of the LTTE cadre cannot be an excuse for failing to say what must be said—the LTTE has led the Tamil masses into a blind alley.

The way forward

The LSSP’s capitulation to Sinhalese nationalism notwithstanding, the sole perspective which offers a way out of the blind alley of bourgeois nationalism is one based on the unified struggle of the Sinhalese and Tamil working class. Under the hegemony of the Tamil and Sri Lankan workers, the Tamil national struggle must be fused with the struggle to mobilize all the oppressed against the rule of the national bourgeoisie. Like all the other outstanding tasks of the democratic revolution, the eradication of national oppression is possible only through the action of a revolutionary workers and peasant government and as part of the struggle for a socialist world. Concretely, this means resolutely opposing the Sri Lankan state in its war against the Tamils of the North and East, demanding the scrapping of the constitution and the abolition of all privileges for Sinhalese and for Sinhalese-speakers, and raising the banner of the United Socialist States of Eelam and Sri Lanka. A key element in this fight is the struggle for the joint mobilization of the masses of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Eelam against the reactionary state system established in 1947-48 and for a Socialist United States of South Asia.

The SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, trace their origins to the proletarian internationalist tendency that emerged in opposition to the LSSP’s capitulation to Sinhalese nationalism and chauvinism. For over three decades, the SEP and RCL have fought to overcome the impediments which the LSSP’s betrayal created to the emergence of a working class-led movement of the oppressed—most importantly the estrangement between Tamils and the working class in the South and the petty-bourgeois chauvinist politics of the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP).

Objective conditions both on a world scale and on the island are now shifting dramatically, however, opening the door for the working class to once again emerge in the eyes of the Tamil masses as the true agent of their liberation.

The East Asian economic collapse, which the international bourgeoisie now concedes is nothing short of a systemic crisis of world capitalism, presages the reemergence of the international proletariat as the antagonist of capital. This reemergence will radically transform world politics—especially in Asia, where over the last three decades the numerical size and specific weight of the working class has grown exponentially.

Globalization and the collapse of the Soviet bureaucracy meanwhile are compelling the national bourgeoisie in the countries of belated capitalist development to reveal themselves ever more openly as an ally and agency of imperialism.

The widespread support given the SEP defense campaign by the Tamils in the South of the island, as well as by the Tamil émigré communities is indicative of a sharp decline in support for the LTTE and growing interest

in an alternative perspective. Indeed, the wave of arrests of SEP members was in the manner of a preemptive strike by the LTTE.

In the coming weeks and months the SEP will intensify its struggle to arm the oppressed masses, Sinhalese and Tamil, with the socialist-internationalist alternative to the LTTE’s separatist and pro-capitalist program.

A political chasm separates the LTTE and the SEP. Nevertheless, we issue this statement in part in the hope it will facilitate the development of a dialog with Tamil militants. We reject the argument that military considerations make it necessary for the LTTE to suppress political debate in the areas under its control. On the contrary, we are convinced such a debate will strengthen the Tamil struggle against national oppression by enabling the Tamil masses of Sri Lanka and Eelam to find a new political axis under the leadership of the working class.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact