

The Tamil question and the struggle against privatization--an exchange of letters

3 April 1999

Greetings,

I came across your news item ["Sri Lanka: Postal workers strike against privatisation"] and thought it newsworthy enough to post on our message board: <http://sudbury.vianet.on.ca/community/cupw/messages/1140.shtml>

The reason that I am writing is that I got BLASTED for printing it. (The message follows). I would love it if the author of your news item would be so kind as to respond to the criticism directed at me for posting the news item?

Here is what I was told for posting it:

"Sri Lanka is a very complicated country.

"First of all it is a bit racist, seven out of ten Sri Lankans are Sinhalese and they have most of the government and otherwise good paying jobs. They are mostly Buddhists, and have the official language.

"The minority in government and other occupations are the Tamils and most practice Hinduism. There is a great animosity between the two and in 1977 there was great violence when mobs looted and beat Tamil citizens and businesses and over 100 Tamils were killed and then the Tamil minority cried for secession.

"The concession made after the riots was that Sinhala would remain the official language, and now where Tamils predominate, their tongue, Tamil, is the official language. But they still do not have a lot of rights in their country and are a minority in the postal service.

"This is why everyone SHOULD NOT support in any way an anti-privatization plan by a union that steps on the rights of minorities. The majority of union executives in Sri Lanka are Sinhalese.

"Sorry sister, but before you post links of something that you know nothing about except by reading labour bulletins, please get your facts straight. Get your facts straight before condoning and supporting a movement that is pro-active against the rights of minorities in a country that you really know nothing about.

"Thank you!"

Solidarity,

Cindi Foreman
webmaster

[Canadian Union of Postal Workers] Sudbury Local 612

Dear Cindi,

The *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent who wrote the article concerning the Sri Lankan postal strike has asked me to reply in his stead.

Let me begin by thanking you for bringing the exchange on your web site to our attention. It raises issues of vital importance to workers in North America as well as in Sri Lanka. Everywhere big business and its political representatives are intent on stoking ethnic, racial and religious divisions (favoring one group, then another) so as to fragment and politically disarm the working class.

Before responding specifically to your correspondent's argument that the postal workers' struggle against privatization does not merit support, I would like to make two points.

The *WSWS* article lent no support to the leadership of the postal workers' unions. Rather it warned that the postal workers' unions were isolating "the postal workers struggle from the growing worker-peasant opposition" to the People's Alliance (PA) government and that the unions' alternative to privatization--the transformation of the post office into a government-owned, business enterprise--accepts the central premise of privatization, i.e., "that public services and workers' jobs and wages should be subordinated to the exigencies of the capitalist market."

Second, the *WSWS* is the public voice of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). The ICFI's Sri Lankan section, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), has a long and proud record of defending the democratic rights of the Tamils. It fights for the repeal of the Sri Lankan constitution, which enshrines Sinhalese as the sole official language and Buddhism as the state religion. For 15 years, the SEP has consistently

demanded the withdrawal of all government security forces from the majority Tamil-speaking North and East, site of a guerrilla secessionist struggle under the leadership of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The December 4, 1998 issue of the SEP's Sinhalese-language newspaper, *Kamkaru Mawatha*, carried a page-long article condemning a statement by the general secretary of the Union of Postal and Telecommunications Officers, N.P. Hettiarachchi, supporting the Sri Lankan state's ethno-chauvinist war. The article explained that while the Tamils of the North and East have borne the brunt of the war casualties, the war itself has been directed against all working people, Sinhalese and Tamil. Under both the current PA regime and its United National Party (UNP) predecessor, Sri Lanka's rulers have used the war as the pretext to attack the democratic rights of working people in the Sinhalese-speaking South and to impose wage austerity and social spending cuts.

Your correspondent fails to draw any distinction between the reactionary, pro-war/pro-government stance of the postal unions leaders and the struggle of rank-and-file postal workers to defend their jobs and wages. He condemns both equally and, in so doing, supports privatization and aligns himself with People's Alliance government, i.e., with the very regime that is prosecuting the war against the Tamils of the North and East!

Here we must be clear. Privatization is aimed not just at postal workers, but the entire working class. The mainly Tamil-speaking workers on Sri Lanka's tea and rubber plantations have, thus far, been privatization's principal victims. They have faced sweeping job and pay cuts and demands for increased production since the tea and rubber estates were privatized earlier this decade.

Moreover, privatization is a key plank in the International Monetary Fund's economic prescription for Sri Lanka. With the IMF's support, the PA hopes to make Sri Lanka a haven for foreign investors in search of cheap labor, by eliminating social and public services and removing all regulatory restraints on capital.

It is not coincidental that it was the UNP government of Jayewardene--which, on taking power in 1977, set about reorienting Sri Lanka's economy in lines with the demands of international capital--that launched pogrom-style violence against the Tamils and then, in 1983, the current war. The UNP and its ruling class sponsors whipped up Sinhalese chauvinism to channel mounting discontent over poverty, unemployment and social dislocation in a reactionary direction.

That your correspondent makes no mention of the fact that Tamil-speaking postal workers, including those in the northern and eastern provinces, participated in the anti-privatization strike is most revealing. Rather than fighting to strengthen the class solidarity of Tamil and Sinhalese postal workers by urging them to break with the chauvinist, pro-government and class-collaborationist perspective of their union leaders, he prefers to align himself with a government that is waging war on the Tamil minority. The truth is, for all your correspondent's denunciations of chauvinism, he essentially adopts a chauvinist position himself, holding all Sinhalese workers responsible for the policies of the Sri Lankan capitalists and their supporters in the trade union bureaucracy.

The real issue is not one of ethnicity, but of class interests and political program. The Ceylon Workers Congress, whose leadership is mainly Tamil-speaking, has supported, as a coalition partner of both the UNP and PA governments, the right-wing socioeconomic and war policies of Sri Lanka's rulers.

The record of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in regards to workers' rights is also lamentable. In the areas under its control, the LTTE effectively denies workers the right to self-organization. Although the LTTE once mouthed socialist phrases, it now says an independent Tamil Eelam would emulate the export-led growth strategy of the East Asian "tigers." In other words, the LTTE leadership aspires to be junior partners and middlemen for the multinationals.

The Sri Lankan SEP fights among postal workers and all sections of the oppressed to fuse opposition to the war, the oppression of the Tamil minority, and the socioeconomic policies of Sri Lanka's rulers into a mass political movement aimed at establishing a Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

For the *World Socialist Web Site*,

Keith Jones



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact