Opposition to Sri Lankan government grows

Political lessons of May 25 picket

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8 June 2000

The 3,000-strong picket held on May 25 at Colombo's Lipton Circus to protest against the Sri Lankan government's emergency war regulations was significant in a number of respects.

The demonstration was a clear indication of the mounting opposition to the Peoples Alliance (PA) regime of President Kumaratunga and its reactionary war against the Tamil population in the North and East. The demonstration was held in defiance of emergency regulations, which had banned all political activity, strikes and imposed draconian press censorship.

With the government having committed itself to spending additional millions of rupees on armaments, coupled with daily announcements of prices increases and demands for wage cuts, the demonstration was an expression of the hostility of wide sections of the population to the intolerable burdens being imposed on them.

Furthermore the government's decision to disperse the protest using tear gas, chemically-treated water and police baton attacks points to the Kumaratunga regime's fear of the growing combativity of the working class in opposition to its policies. Under conditions where the war against the Tamils has no support among the mass of workers and peasants, who see their children being used as cannon fodder, the government is fearful that the series of military debacles suffered in the past months could bring the long-developing dissatisfaction of the masses to a head.

These facts alone call for a political examination of the parties that called the demonstration—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Muslim United Liberation Front (MULF).

While the participants in the protest were attracted by its main slogans—“No to oppressive regulations”, “No to censorship”, “No to racism”, “No to war” and “No to foreign forces”—and were looking for a way to advance their struggle against the PA regime, the organisers had another agenda.

They called the protest not to initiate an independent struggle of the working class against the war, but rather to try to come to the head of the growing opposition to the PA regime and turn it towards the formation of a new bourgeois coalition in the event of the collapse of the Kumaratunga government.

The most politically significant fact about the slogans employed on the protest was that the demand for the complete withdrawal of all Sri Lankan army forces from the North and the East was not raised. Neither was there a call for a cessation of all war expenditure.

The silence on these elementary demands speaks volumes for the political agenda being developed by the NSSP-JVP alliance.

Only 10 days before the demonstration both the MULF (which is closely associated with the NSSP) and the JVP had participated in the all-party conference convened by Kumaratunga to “discuss the situation that had arisen in the northern and eastern provinces” following the series of defeats suffered by the Sri Lankan armed forces at the hands of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The meeting, held under conditions of severe press censorship, was nothing more than an attempt to enlist support for the war, and provided a platform for the most extreme right wing Sinhala chauvinist organisations. The MULF, however, fully participated in the discussion while the JVP only quit the gathering on procedural differences. Significantly it issued a statement criticising the government from the right, saying that its devolution package to give additional powers to provincial councils weakened the state and “forces the country towards the victory of separatism”—the same stand as taken by the chauvinist organisations which regard devolution as a betrayal of the “Sinhala nation”.

The NSSP decided not to participate in the all-party talks. But it was not a decision based on principle, the NSSP having taken part in a similar round table meeting convened by the right wing president J. R. Jayawardena in 1986. Nor was it based on opposition to Kumaratunga. After all, while she was in opposition, the NSSP had worked to present her as a “working class leader” before campaigning for the election of her PA regime in the 1994 elections. The NSSP's decision was based on a tactical assessment that given the deepening hostility to the government, it would be more advantageous to stay away.

Accordingly NSSP general secretary Vikramabahu Karunaratne wrote a letter to the president declaring he would not attend because she was “summoning the discussion to get direct support for the reactionary repressive program that she was conducting and the NSSP could not in any way contribute to it.”

The NSSP may have fallen out (at least for the present) with Kumaratunga. But this is not the result of some principled opposition to the war as can be seen from an examination of the program of its new ally, the JVP.

Immediately after the May 25 demonstration Karunaratne issued a statement declaring that the NSSP expected “the JVP to call a broader alliance of the left to take the struggle forward.” The

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direction such a struggle would take is revealed by a series of statements issued by the JVP which make clear that it opposes the Kumaratunga regime not because it has continued the war, but rather because it has proved incapable of securing a military victory.

In an interview with the Sinhala chauvinist weekly *Lakbima* on May 7, conducted in the aftermath of the military debacle at Elephant Pass which was lost for the first time to the LTTE, the JVP propaganda secretary Wimal Weerawansa declared: “This defeat is a defeat for us all. We will not give an Eelam (the Tamil homeland) at any cost. At the same time we will not allow new victories for them. If the LTTE wants to resolve the question they can discuss the problems with us. But if they want to continue the war we are ready to meet that situation.”

Far from opposing the war, Weerawansa offered advice on how the LTTE could be defeated. “What should be done is to cut off the LTTE's supply routes. We will redeploy the coast guard system which J. R. (President Jayawardena) removed.”

In a statement issued on May 5 on the fall of Elephant Pass the JVP political committee declared: “ ... the false lines of the capitalist parties led only to the strengthening of the cruel hands of the bloodthirsty LTTE.” The same issue of the paper (*Seenuwa* May 15) in which the statement was published carried an open letter to Kumaratunga from JVP general secretary Tilvin Silva declaring it was her fault that Elephant Pass had fallen into the hands of “the bloodthirsty LTTE.”

The reaction of the NSSP to the fall of Elephant Pass went along similar lines. A statement issued by Linus Jayatilleke, a prominent Polit Bureau member of the NSSP and the secretary of the New Left Front (comprising the NSSP and the MULF), declared: “The PA government should be held responsible for this awful debacle in the northern war.” In other words, like the JVP, the NSSP regards the defeat of the Sri Lankan army as an “awful” blow to the nation.

With the defeat at Elephant Pass, the NSSP issued a call for the Kumaratunga government to resign. But what regime should replace it? Given that the NSSP is demanding a “broader alliance of the left” under the leadership of the JVP, such a government would include not only the JVP but a wide range of organisations which have split off from the main bourgeois parties, including the newly established openly racist Sinhala Urumaya (Sinhala Heritage) with which the JVP has few differences.

The history of the workers' movement internationally and above all in Sri Lanka is replete with the disastrous consequences of alliances and coalitions with bourgeois parties and organisations. But the NSSP is now trying to write a new chapter in this history of opportunism.

Having previously aligned itself with the PA regime, it now calls for the working class to subordinate itself to the JVP—the very organisation whose terror campaign of 1987-90 saw the murder of hundreds of workers and trade unionists, including dozens of NSSP members and an attempt on the life of the general secretary of the party.

There is another side to the policies of the NSSP, which, although at first sight appearing to be in contradiction with its alliance with the JVP, casts a light on its ingrained hostility to the independence of the working class, which forms the foundation of all its political twists and turns. This is its attempt to boost the “revolutionary” credentials of the LTTE.

In a statement issued on April 24, immediately after the fall of Elephant Pass, Karunaratne declared that the time had now come for the “oppressed in all communities to get together and overthrow the exploitative set up and establish peace and democracy with the right of self-determination to the Tamil speaking people.”

No doubt Karunaratne's inclusion of the slogan of self-determination was designed to inveigle some Tamil voters in the Colombo municipality of which he is a city father. But there was a more profound reason as well, flowing from the essential character of the NSSP.

The guiding thread of its politics has always been the subordination of the working class and peasant masses to one or other bourgeois organisation in order to prevent the development of socialist consciousness. This is why on the one hand Karunaratne hunts with the defenders of the Sinhala motherland, aligning his party with the JVP, while on the other he runs with the LTTE and its program of a separate state for the Tamil people.

There is an essential unity in this seeming contradiction. Both positions are based on the conception that the democratic rights of the masses can be defended and protected through the bourgeois state—be it the Sinhalese Motherland of Sri Lanka advanced by the JVP or the Tamil homeland of the LTTE. Underlying both positions is the rejection of the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil working class and peasant masses in the struggle for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, and the securing of democratic rights on the basis of a socialist program.

The May 25 demonstration certainly revealed the growing opposition to the Kumaratunga regime and its reactionary war against the Tamil people. But it is also demonstrated the necessity for the demarcation of an independent program for the working class in a struggle against the politics of the NSSP and its Sinhala chauvinist allies.

The starting point for such a perspective are the demands of the Socialist Equality Party for the unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan troops from the Northern and Eastern provinces and the ending of all finance for the Colombo regime's reactionary war. The SEP opposes both the defence of the Sri Lankan state and the creation of another bourgeois statelet on the island in the form of Eelam.

The problems confronting the Sinhala and Tamil workers and peasants can only be resolved through the struggle for the United Socialist Republic of Eelam and Sri Lanka. Only the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of this perspective can lead the way out of the morass into which bourgeois rule has dragged the oppressed masses.

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