

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka replies to a supporter of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

29 September 2000

Dear Sir,

Let me first declare my identity. I was born in Sri Lanka and have one Sinhalese and one half-Tamil parent. However, I consider myself to be Sinhalese, as I have no comprehension of the Tamil language or culture.

Now, to the substance of my letter. I read with interest of the SEP's decision to contest elections in Sri Lanka. Although I have respect for many aspects of your position (particularly your overtly anti-racist stance vis-a-vis the Tamil nation) I am concerned about a number of inconsistencies in your position regarding the Tamil national question, which I would, if possible, like to take up with you.

Let me explain.

In your recent policy statement, you seem to advocate the UNCONDITIONAL WITHDRAWAL of Sinhalese troops from the Tamil homeland—a position with which I agree.

But what you seem less willing to acknowledge (and I don't see why you need to hide from this) is that this would, in practice, mean conceding victory to the LTTE.

What would necessarily follow from such an LTTE victory is peace on the LTTE's own terms (including the possibility of a separate state). That is because an unconditional withdrawal of troops would imply no further threat of Sinhalese armed occupation of Tamil areas and hence no need for the LTTE to compromise at all.

Is that something which you are prepared (as I am) to accept?

The reason I ask is that your policy statement also declares strong opposition to the LTTE on grounds that it is a "petty bourgeois" movement. I am confused as to how you square this up with your apparent support for the withdrawal of Sinhalese forces—i.e., victory to the LTTE?

One possibility that comes to mind is that you actually support an LTTE victory but are indulging in a 'tactical' manoeuvre by criticising the group in order to avoid alienating the Sinhalese public for whom the idea of supporting an LTTE victory would be unacceptable.

Another possibility is that taking an openly revolutionary defeatist position would at the present time be too physically dangerous in Sri Lanka, where you plan to contest elections.

The problem, for me, arises only if your position is not "tactical" and if your critique of the LTTE is thus genuine. In that case, I have important issues to raise with you.

In my view, that would amount to one of the subtlest manifestations of Sinhalese racism of all, which many Sri Lankan left parties seem to have unconsciously fallen victim to.

It is the trap of supporting Tamil self-determination in THEORY while opposing it in PRACTICE.

I'll explain. Most Tamil people now acutely realise that any opposition to the movement which is most capable of evicting the Sinhalese army from their homeland (the LTTE) amounts to a weakening of their march towards freedom from Sinhalese occupation, their most vital and

immediate need.

Your own critique of the LTTE is thus likely to appear in the Tamil mind as little more than a hindrance to their liberation struggle against what they see as a brutal foreign army of occupation.

Even your acknowledgement of "Eelam" makes little difference to Tamils if you simultaneously give fuel to the ideological apparatus that works towards discrediting the LTTE and thus hinders their struggle (this is what you have unfortunately done in your policy statement).

In other words, your efforts to condemn the LTTE as "petty bourgeois" will appear as ill-timed and inappropriate to a people who have been at the receiving end of Sinhalese-led state violence for years, and have finally (painfully) built up a military capability to resist these forces to a greater degree than ever before.

Without realising it, then, you are contributing to the powerful and ugly momentum of Sinhalese racism.

To be fair, you differ from other left parties in your call for a withdrawal of Sinhalese forces from Tamil areas. I can only hope you are prepared to stomach the full implications of such a withdrawal. And that, instead of seeing an LTTE victory as a cause for sorrow, you see it as a cause for celebration.

Of course, the Tamil people may have to undergo a difficult process of trying to democratise their country (Eelam) following an LTTE victory, and will have to consider what sort of relationship they want Eelam to have with Sinhalese Sri Lanka in order to avoid "ethnic cleansing" in various regions. But that should not lead us to attempt to undermine the leadership of the Tamil nation as they are progressing towards victory.

The correct thing to do, in my opinion, would be to spend less time criticising their leadership and more time lending weight to their freedom struggle. The best way to do this would be to foment an anti-war movement among the Sinhalese as all-encompassing (including workers, capitalists, Buddhist monks) as the Tamil freedom struggle itself, and as were the anti-Vietnam war protests in the US that led to the collapse of the war effort.

Indeed, in the US example, it would have been counter-productive and wrong to tarnish the Ho Chi Minh leadership, whatever its class-orientation. The immediate need was freedom from brutal military occupation.

That, too, is the Tamil people's immediate need. And we should religiously resist the entrenched Sinhalese temptation to dictate to Tamils the form that their struggle should take and who their leadership should be.

That itself is a manifestation of Sinhalese racism from which we are hopefully trying to wrench ourselves.

I look forward to a reply.

PS - I think your site's Sri Lanka coverage is extremely insightful and thought-provoking.

SR

Dear SR,

Firstly I would like to apologise for the delay in replying to your email. The questions that you raise about the attitude of the SEP to the war and the perspective of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are crucial and we welcome the opportunity to answer them.

As we pointed out in the statement to which you refer, the SEP calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan armed forces from the north and east. We insist that not a man or a rupee be spent on a war being waged to suppress the democratic rights of the Tamil minority. The SEP, like its forerunner the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), has consistently campaigned against all forms of discrimination and to unite all workers regardless of race, religion or language to abolish capitalism and begin the reconstruction of society on a socialist basis.

Your disagreement is that while the SEP advocates the withdrawal of the armed forces it does not call for an LTTE victory and indeed criticises the LTTE. You speculate on possible “tactical” reasons for the SEP’s stance but your main concern is that the criticisms are genuine. You conclude: “In my view, that would amount to one of the subtlest manifestations of Sinhalese racism of all, which many Sri Lankan left parties seem to have unconsciously fallen victim to. It is the trap of supporting Tamil self-determination in THEORY while opposing it in PRACTICE.”

Before dealing with the substance of your remarks, let me assure you that there is nothing “tactical” about our criticisms of the LTTE. It is a cardinal principle for Marxists to tell the truth to the working class regardless of whether it is immediately popular or not. That is the only means by which workers can be educated—and without a politically conscious working class socialism is impossible. Our party is well aware of the dangers and, while we take all possible precautions, our members have paid a heavy price over the last 32 years for campaigning courageously for our program.

Three RCL members were murdered by JVP thugs in the late 1980s for opposing its chauvinist program. Our members—both Sinhalese and Tamil—have been arrested and detained for opposing the policies of the United National Party governments and the Peoples Alliance (PA) government. During 1998 the SEP in Sri Lanka, along with its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), conducted an international campaign to demand that the LTTE release four of our comrades who had been arbitrarily jailed in the Wannu region.

At the conclusion of that successful campaign, the SEP issued a statement in which we conducted a historical review of the issue of national self-determination. We made absolutely clear that we do not support the LTTE’s demand for a separate capitalist state of Eelam either in theory or in practice. The statement entitled “The SEP and the fight for the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam” is featured prominently on the front page of the *World Socialist Web Site* and, if you have not done so already, I would suggest that you read it carefully.

You accuse the SEP of “one of the subtlest manifestations of Sinhalese racism”. Our analysis of the LTTE, however, is based not on race but on class. Moreover the term “petty bourgeois” is not an epithet that we fling gratuitously at our political opponents, but a precise characterisation of the policies that they pursue. The program of the LTTE does not represent the working class or the oppressed Tamil masses but the interests of sections of the Tamil middle class who aspire to their own capitalist statelet. Their aim is to establish themselves as compradors for international capital in the north and east of the island and elsewhere in the region.

The Marxist movement has never been uncritical of bourgeois national leaders even when, as in China and India in the first part of the 20th century, they stood at the head of anti-colonial movements that unified broad masses of people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. We always pointed out that their anti-imperialist and, at times, socialist

rhetoric was aimed at exploiting the anti-colonial movement of the working class and the peasantry to strike a deal with the imperialist powers. If the movement threatened their own privileged position they turned on it—in some cases brutally.

In the last two decades, however, the emergence of globally mobile capital has undermined the program of national economic regulation on which parties such as the Indian Congress were based. Particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, all of these movements—from the ANC in South Africa to the PLO in the Middle East—have rapidly dropped their anti-imperialist pretences and sought to cut a deal to set up their own state and offer their “own” working class as cheap labour to the transnational corporations.

The LTTE is no exception. The leadership has shelved its anti-imperialist and socialist phraseology, and, at least until the Asian economic crisis erupted in 1997-1998, has openly advocated the “Asian tigers” as the model for an independent Eelam. Moreover, in order to retain its grip over the Tamil masses, the LTTE has increasingly resorted to crude racial and communalist demagoguery—blaming Sinhalese and Muslim workers and rural poor for the crimes of the ruling class. The end product of this reactionary logic is to be found in the LTTE’s indiscriminate terrorist attacks on Sinhalese civilians and on Tamil Muslims.

In our statement we challenged the LTTE to answer a number of questions:

“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? ...

“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.”

Not surprisingly, the LTTE leadership has yet to provide any answers. Although it has not founded its own state, workers and peasants in the areas under LTTE control have had more than a taste of what such a state would be like. The LTTE administration works closely with wealthy local businessmen while putting enormous burdens on the backs of ordinary working people. The denial of basic democratic rights to our comrades in the Wannu is a sharp expression of the treatment that the LTTE metes out to all its political opponents and, indeed, to ordinary workers and villagers who are critical of its policies.

These facts cannot be dismissed with the excuse that the LTTE is engaged in a war. The Colombo government and the military give the same reason for their arbitrary repression and trampling on democratic rights. It is precisely under conditions of crisis, such as war, that the class basis of a program or a regime is tested and most clearly exposed—whether it is in the interests of the wealthy few or the majority of working people. The fact that the LTTE has resorted increasingly to repressive methods to maintain its grip points to the fact that there is deepening dissatisfaction with, and opposition among, ordinary Tamils to its aims and policies.

You have interpreted our call for the withdrawal of all troops from the north and east in a rather formal manner. Our policy is not aimed at helping the LTTE establish a separate capitalist state but rather is part of a program for building an independent and unified movement of the working class and oppressed masses—Sinhalese and Tamil—against the war

and the capitalist system that has produced it.

The SEP—and the RCL before it—has a lengthy record of opposing the war and mobilising workers to vigorously protest against the outrages committed against Tamils by the government and the army—the hundreds detained without trial as “LTTE sympathisers,” the disappearances and torture, the bombing of Tamil villagers and the killing of Tamil fishermen, to name but a few.

We fight for the development of a broad movement of the working class to oppose the Sinhala chauvinist parties, the Buddhist prelates and other warmongers and defend the democratic rights of all working people, regardless of race, language or religion. Such a movement would organise protests and meetings to demand an immediate end to the taxes and other economic burdens used to finance the war and to halt the economic conscription of youth to serve as cannon fodder for the army. In that way the working class would win to its side layers of the urban and rural poor—Sinhalese and Tamil—who have been forced to bear the brunt of the war.

As we explain in our statement: “In fighting to mobilise the masses in the South against the war and the Peoples Alliance government, 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 mobilisation 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.”

Those who reject the basic perspective of Marxism—the independent mobilisation of the working class for the seizure of power and the reconstruction of society on socialist lines—will also regard our program of unifying the Tamil and Sinhalese working class and oppressed masses as impossibly utopian. But the fact that such a movement does not exist today is bound up with deep-seated historical problems connected to the leadership of the workers' movement in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The history of the Trotskyist movement in the 1940s and early 1950s in Sri Lanka testifies to the fact that the working class can, indeed, be unified and mobilised on a socialist program. In that period, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and before it the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), assembled within their ranks the most courageous and talented Marxist revolutionaries who attracted a strong following throughout the working class and oppressed masses—both Tamil and Sinhala.

In 1948 immediately after independence the BLPI opposed the introduction of the citizenship laws that stripped away the basic

democratic rights of hundreds of thousands of Tamil-speaking plantation workers. The 1953 hartal called by the LSSP against the imposition of economic burdens unified workers and the rural poor on an unprecedented scale across the island and brought the UNP government to its knees. It compelled the cabinet to meet in emergency session on a British warship anchored in Colombo harbour and reverse the government's policies.

The hartal sent shock waves through the entire political establishment. In its aftermath a section of the ruling class concluded that it had to build a social base among the rural poor and turned to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) with its anti-British demagoguery and Sinhala chauvinism. While the LSSP opposed the SLFP's introduction of Sinhala-only—a language policy that discriminated against Tamils—in the 1950s, the LSSP successively adapted itself to the parliamentary framework, to nationalism and to the communalism of the SLFP. The LSSP's political backsliding culminated in 1964 in its entry into the SLFP-led government of Mrs Bandaranaike.

The LSSP's degeneration had profound political consequences. By abandoning the struggle to unify workers on a socialist perspective, the LSSP left the working class and oppressed masses with no alternative to communalist politics and directly contributed to the rise of racially-based organisations—petty bourgeois formations such as the LTTE and the Sinhala chauvinist JVP in the south.

The LSSP's betrayal was bound up with the emergence of an opportunist trend within the Fourth International headed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. The Pabloites advocated that the sections of the Trotskyist movement should adapt themselves to the existing national political milieu in whichever country they operated. The RCL was formed in 1968 to reforge a Marxist leadership in the Sri Lankan working class as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International, which was formed in the 1953 split with Pablo and Mandel.

You say in your email: “Most Tamil people now acutely realise that any opposition to the movement which is most capable of evicting the Sinhalese army from their homeland (the LTTE) amounts to a weakening of their march towards freedom from Sinhalese occupation, their most vital and immediate need.”

Firstly, we do not concede that “most Tamils” embrace the LTTE or necessarily see a separate Eelam as a solution to their problems. Our experience is that there is growing disenchantment even among the LTTE's close supporters with its perspective, its treatment of the local population in areas under its control, and with its wheeling and dealing with the major powers.

But there is a more fundamental point. No matter how many Tamils agree or disagree with the LTTE, the SEP will continue to warn that its perspective is a political trap and to seek to convince Tamil workers, intellectuals and others that the unified struggle of the working class for socialist internationalism provides the only progressive solution to the war.

Your argument that any opposition to the LTTE undermines the “immediate and vital need” of Tamils echoes the attacks levelled by generations of opportunists against Marxism: that any criticism “weakens the struggle” and “splits the movement”. All of this begs the question: what exactly are the needs of the Tamil people and where is the LTTE leading them? The SEP not only has a right, but also a responsibility, to warn the working class of the political dangers posed by the LTTE's outlook.

The history of the last century is strewn with examples of the consequences of the working class following the opportunist course that you recommend. Let me cite just two—one from recent Sri Lankan history and secondly, the example you choose—Vietnam.

In 1994, Chandrika Kumaratunga came to power with her Peoples Alliance—a coalition of parties including the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka. She promised to end the war, lift living

standards and to lift the repressive measures of the previous UNP governments. She was supported by all the left and radical parties including the NSSP as well as all the various bourgeois and petty bourgeois Tamil parties. It is worth noting that the LTTE, which now vigorously condemns Kumaratunga, backed her election as a progressive alternative to the UNP and began talks with her in 1995 on the basis of her proposed constitutional changes.

The RCL was the only party that warned Kumaratunga was incapable of ending the war in a progressive manner, of raising living standards or guaranteeing democratic rights. We were subjected to the same criticisms from various “lefts” as those you make—“the SEP is splitting the movement”; “Kumaratunga may not be perfect but her election is a step forward”; “she will at least answer the vital need of the day and end the war”, etc etc. To put it politely: we have heard it all before.

Six years on, you will possibly agree that we were right. But the more significant question is this: what was the objective political role of all those, including the LTTE, who painted Kumaratunga in bright colours as a “progressive” and a “democrat”? Without them Kumaratunga would have been unable to come to power or to carry out the measures that she did, including the intensification of the war. By throwing sand in the eyes of workers, Tamil and Sinhalese alike, these parties blocked the development of any class assessment and solution to the problems and difficulties they confronted.

The same issues arise in relation to Vietnam. The Trotskyist movement in Vietnam trenchantly criticised the Stalinist leadership of Ho Chi Minh for its collaboration with the imperialist powers during and after World War II and paid with the lives of its leaders who were murdered by the Stalinists. If the National Liberation Front finally succeeded in forcing the withdrawal of US troops in 1975 and defeating the client regime that it left behind it was not because of, but despite, the Ho Chi Minh leadership and its backers in Moscow and Beijing, who at every point were looking for a deal with imperialism at the expense of the Vietnamese masses.

You say it was “counterproductive and wrong to tarnish the Ho Chi Minh leadership, whatever its class orientation. The immediate need was freedom from military occupation.” But the class orientation of the Stalinists determined what would transpire in the aftermath of their victory over the US. What has been the balance sheet of the 25 years since the victory of the Vietcong and the Stalinist perspective of “socialism in one country”? The very imperialist forces it threw out in 1975 are back in business in Vietnam, fattening their bank balances, by subjecting the workers and the impoverished peasantry to even harsher exploitation than exists across the Indian subcontinent.

As I have attempted to indicate in the course of this reply, the tragic events that have unfolded in Sri Lanka over the last half century are bound up with the complex, unresolved questions of the 20th century, in particular with the theoretical and political problems thrown up by the experiences of the international workers movement. Around the world those who are concerned at the apparently intractable crises confronting humanity are obliged to look more deeply into the historical roots of the problems. Any honest review of the issues inevitably confronts one with the necessity of conducting a detailed examination of the protracted and difficult struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism and all forms of nationalist politics in the workers' movement.

Yours sincerely,

Wije Dias,

World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board



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