

Letter from SK

10 March 2001

To the WSWs,

What follows is a brief contribution to the debate that has erupted between the General Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and SR. There are four areas of the SEP General Secretary's reply I would like to consider.

(1) the SEP seems reluctant to acknowledge the following realities:

a) that there is a raging national liberation struggle being fought by ethnic Tamils in the north-east of the island aimed at expelling Sinhala rule from Tamil territory.

b) that this struggle is being led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

c) that it is backed by all classes within the Tamil nation.

If the SEP fails to recognise these three simple facts then sadly it will be unable to do what all true socialist should be doing in relation to the ethnic conflict—namely, unconditionally supporting the Tamils' liberation struggle and their right to self-determination, the failure of which would be a far cry from Lenin's principled stand on the “national question”.

The SEP, I think, should clearly convey the above truths to the Sinhalese people. Otherwise, its seemingly radical demand to “withdraw Sinhalese troops” sounds rather hollow.

Worse still, the SEP could play directly into the hands of the Sinhalese establishment without even realising it.

For, the Sri Lankan government's main priority now is to show that the war is being waged solely against the LTTE—a position which, curiously enough, the SEP is itself reinforcing, although obliquely, to the convenience of the Sri Lankan state.

In other words, Colombo is fully aware that most Sinhalese people will be unimpressed by the SEP's muddled-up slogans calling for the withdrawal of Sinhalese soldiers while, at the same time, advocating the demise of the LTTE.

However, what is crucial for the Colombo administration right now is to intensely promote anti-LTTE propaganda particularly among the Tamils, and also within the Sinhala trade union movement. Unwittingly or not, this is a policy which the SEP's ideas presently contribute towards.

No wonder, then, that the election commissioner, who has previously prevented the SEP contesting elections, has suddenly given it the nod, thereby paving the way for the SEP to utilise prime-time political broadcasts on radio and television.

Also, as SR points out, the military's turning a blind eye to SEP members' political activities in army-controlled areas in the warzone suggests the SEP's stance snugly fits in with the military's own agenda!

(2) The SEP informs us of how both the leftist BLPI and LSSP parties had protested against the racist acts of the post-colonial

Sinhala government. But did these parties raise the fundamental democratic issue involved in the British colonialists framing a unitary state and handing it over to the Sinhalese?

No they did not. (And isn't it odd that the call for the United States of Eelam and Sri Lanka did not emerge from Trotskyists at the time!).

Some historians point out that the British did this deliberately because they could depend on the pro-western sentiments of the Sinhalese elite led by D.S. Senanayake rather than a Tamil Federal administration, who, the British suspected, would be more inclined to rub along with India who the British never felt too comfortable with.

Indeed, if Tamil elitist politicians were wobbly on this issue, as I think they were, then why didn't socialist leaders at that time challenge them and expose their opportunism to the Tamil people?

Would that not have been an ideal time to put forward the United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam slogan?

An extremely treacherous travesty to democracy was inherent in the British 1947 constitutional settlement, which saw the installation of the Sinhala-dominated unitary state. Socialists at that time did not address this issue. Their subsequent protests at ill-treatment of Tamils by the Sinhala governments, therefore, failed to hit the nail on the head—thus the central issue was left aloof for Tamil nationalists themselves to tackle later.

Indeed, if they had taken a principled stand, and fought hard for the rights of Tamils, these Trotskyists could quite possibly have built substantial in-roads into Tamil society—a prospect that would have changed the entire post-colonial history of Sri Lanka quite dramatically.

In reality, however, they failed to relate to the Tamil nationalist movement in any meaningful way either during or after British rule. (I think, they failed to relate to the Sinhala nationalist movement, too, which began during the imperialists' rule, and which had a momentum of its own in opposition to Sinhala elitist politics.)

This took the form of a Sinhala Buddhist revivalist campaign to defend indigenous culture and the living conditions of the Sinhala poor under the British. Politically dominating the Tamils through a Sinhala state was, importantly, not part of it.

A parallel movement for the revival of the Tamil Saivist culture also emerged in the north and east which represented the beginnings of the growing Tamil national awareness.

Both of these movements, in my view, had a democratic content, which the Trotskyists lacked the flexibility, and indeed the tact, to relate to.

The socialists' failure to grasp the essence of these social developments probably made it difficult for them to penetrate into

them, thus making these social forces vulnerable to opportunistic elitist politicians on both sides.

Thus, as the growing Sinhala Buddhist revivalist campaign came into conflict with the first post-colonialist elitist government of the UNP, a new capitalist political party, the SLFP, emerged to replace it, while the well-established LSSP looked on helplessly.

The LSSP failed miserably to relate to the democratic essence of Sinhala Buddhist aspirations, leaving the Sinhala majority exposed to the power politics of the Sinhala elite who had already tasted the advantages of whipping up anti-Tamil racism within the unitary set-up.

These Sinhala aspirations were, fundamentally, very much along the same lines as those of the Tamils. But the Sinhala rulers wanted to implement the Sinhala Buddhist demands across the WHOLE island, thus provoking Tamil anger.

Since colonial rule, all economic activity had been concentrated within the Sinhala territory, centred around the capital Colombo, forcing widespread Tamil migration to the Sinhala south and causing Tamil competition for jobs and businesses.

Sinhala-Tamil communal tension, meanwhile, was turning the place into a permanent battleground while the Tamil north and east was turning into an economic wasteland, with a rapidly increasing military presence,

Fast-growing racist sentiments thus became a lucrative commodity for capitalist power politics.

It was only a matter of time, then, before the democratic essence of the Sinhala Buddhist campaign was replaced by anti-Tamil racism and Sinhala supremacist sentiments.

Perhaps this depressing post-colonial scenario took this form primarily due to a) the unitary state arbitrarily imposed on a two-nation island b) the socialists' failure to challenge this unjust constitutional settlement; c) the socialists' incompetence in taking over both national revivalist movements.

This episode in leftist politics in our country, I suggest, should be subjected to an unbiased examination by today's socialists.

This grassroots Sinhala nationalism, initiated by people like Anagarika Dharmapala, which confronted British rule in their own way, also had a democratic content to it. But the socialists' failure to grasp this, I suspect, made it difficult for them to penetrate into it, thus making this movement vulnerable to Sinhala right-wing politicians who readily exploited their aspirations for their own political advantage.

The real Tamil anti-colonial movement which in fact evolved, to some extent, independently of elitist Tamil politics, was initiated by Tamil patriots such as Arumugam Navalar. Whatever the inevitable limitations and inadequacies of this nationalist trend were, its content was I think essentially progressive.

But if Trotskyists were put off by its form (or appearance), and if it did not quite fit in to their model of "class struggle", then that would explain why they failed to relate to it in a positive way.

Eventually, as mainstream Tamil politicians, in their dealings with the Sinhala state, continued to compromise with the growing democratic aspirations of the Tamil movement, the disaffected Tamil youth battled hard to create a new leadership from their own ranks which culminated in the emergence of the Liberation Tigers.

The SEP's reluctance to now reveal this reality to the Sinhala

people shows they too haven't quite recovered from their predecessors' infantile disorder. Indeed, the SEP's slogan for a "troop withdrawal" could well be perceived by Tamils as a futile ploy to drive a spike between the LTTE and their supporters—a strategy the Sinhala government has relentlessly pursued to no avail.

(3) The SEP seems to imply in a rather backhanded way that there is a danger of the LTTE betraying the national struggle half-way. If the SEP is sincere about this, what they really should be doing is a) unambiguously justifying and backing the raging Tamil struggle to eject the Sinhala troops; b) warning the Tamil people with convincing evidence that the LTTE is about to give up its effort to evict the Sinhala forces who have been occupying the Tamil land for over four decades; c) expressing their own commitment to taking over leadership and carrying on the fight against the troops to a victorious end.

They do none of these other than repeating overused allegations about the LTTE's misdeeds and an impending betrayal.

The SEP has thus avoided taking a genuine revolutionary defeatist position in this national conflict. Hence their concern for the Tamils' plight under occupation sounds hypocritical to say the least.

(4) The noble vision contained in the SEP slogan for a "United States of Eelam and Sri Lanka" is very impressive indeed. All genuine socialists may even dream of a "United States of South Asia," and perhaps even a "United States of the World" as H.G. Wells did.

However, such grand associations can only come about as the VOLUNTARY acts of independent and equal states realising the mutual benefits involved for ordinary people in unshackling the productive forces from the constraints of nation states.

Associative state structures of this sort, however, are unthinkable while there are oppressed and oppressor nations within the areas concerned.

Therefore, an independent Eelam is in fact a PRECONDITION for consulting the Tamil people as to whether they want to form a united framework with Sri Lanka on a voluntary basis or not.

Perhaps, the SEP will someday present their case for a United States of Eelam and Sri Lanka to Eelam Tamils if they ever get to form a government in the south. But in order to do that, they must first win the trust of the Tamil people by UNCONDITIONALLY backing the Tamil liberation struggle, which is presently led by the LTTE, and call upon the Sinhala people to do the same.

Without doing this, the SEP's lip-service to the "United States" slogan too could quite easily be seen by the majority of Tamils as yet another devious ploy to undermine its vanguard at this critical juncture in their struggle.

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