

A reply to an LTTE supporter

Marxism and the national question in Sri Lanka

Part Two

Peter Symonds
12 March 2001

The following is the concluding part of a two-part reply to SK, a supporter of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has for the last 18 years been fighting in Sri Lanka for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island. SK's letter was written in response to a previous exchange between the General Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, Wije Dias, and SR, who criticised the SEP for failing to give uncritical support to the LTTE and its political perspective.

The full text of SK's email is posted at:

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/mar2001/lett-m10.shtml>.

For readers who wish to consult the previous correspondence, the SEP's election statement or the 1998 ICFI statement on the LTTE's release of detained SEP members, these can be found at:

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

[28 September 2000]

Election statement of the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party

A socialist program to end the war and social inequality

[26 September 2000]

Victory of international defense campaign strengthens Tamil struggle

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

[1 December 1998]

You write that the failure of the Trotskyist movement to grasp the essence of the Sinhala and Tamil revivalist movements made “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.”

You are wrong on two counts.

Firstly, the emergence of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was a response by the bourgeoisie to the growing influence of the LSSP in the working class—most graphically revealed in the 1953 island-wide hartal. The general strike, coupled with the shutting of shops, protests and political agitation against the trebling of the price of rice, brought the UNP government to its knees and forced it to back down.

Secondly, the failure of the LSSP was not that it “looked on helplessly,” but that it did precisely what you advise that it should have done—to adapt itself to the Buddhist revivalism, painting what was essentially a reactionary movement in democratic and progressive colours. In doing so, the LSSP began to drop its previous criticisms of the SLFP and Bandaranaike, thus bolstering the political credentials of the SLFP in the

eyes of ordinary workers and the masses. This was the slippery slope that rapidly led to the LSSP's degeneration and betrayal.

The 1953 hartal was an enormous political shock to the Sri Lankan ruling class. It demonstrated the huge gulf between the UNP and the mass of ordinary working people, in the cities, towns and rural areas, and at the same time, the threat posed by the LSSP to bourgeois rule as a whole. None of the capitalist politicians in Sri Lanka had the standing of figures like Gandhi and Nehru as a result of the anti-colonial struggle. And so, confronted with the need to establish a social base among the Sinhalese urban and rural petty bourgeoisie, they turned to the traditions of the Buddhist revival movement.

S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, the Oxford-educated son of a pillar of British colonial rule, who had formed the Great Sinhala Council in the 1930s, established the SLFP in 1951. But it was not until the 1956 elections, in the aftermath of the hartal, that he transformed Buddhist revivalism into a political platform for the SLFP, using the fact that the year officially marked the Buddha Jayanthi—the 2,500 anniversary of Buddha's enlightenment.

Laced with anti-imperialist and “socialist” phrasemongering, he sought to exploit the frustrations of the Sinhalese peasantry over unemployment, the lack of services and continuing poverty by turning it against the English-speaking elite and against those Tamils who had benefitted under British rule. Making Sri Lanka a Buddhist state and Sinhala the only state language, Bandaranaike explained, would create a new era of “religio-democratic socialism” in which the Sinhalese would have a dominant position. In advocating these policies, Bandaranaike was simply making explicit what was inherent in the logic of the Buddhist revivalist movement: that the Sinhalese were a “unique race” and therefore had to be accorded a privileged position in Sri Lankan affairs.

The flavour of the rhetoric is given by a report entitled “The Betrayal of Buddhism,” which Bandaranaike endorsed. It stated: “In this country now, although there is no visible foreign yoke in the form of a colonial government, we are as subject as we were before we broke loose from the British bond a few years ago to the invisible yoke of evil, unenlightened teachings, practices, habits, customs and views fostered by the British. Thus we are still in moral bondage to the West.”

The report castigated the British for breaking down the feudal system of obligatory labour owed to temples and for stealing temple land. It pointed to the disparities in funding between Christian and Buddhist schools and berated the government for giving Christianity too much influence. “Christianity sits enthroned, and Ceylon, bound hand and foot, has been delivered to the foot of the Cross,” it stated, and called for the establishment of a Buddha Sasana Council, with the powers of the

Sinhalese kings, to be funded by the state as a form of reparation for past wrongs.

Bandaranaike was supported by the Buddhist hierarchy which sent its monks out to campaign in the towns and villages. The incumbent UNP Prime Minister Sir John Kotelawala was branded as evil incarnate—the personification of the immoral, whisky-drinking English speaking elite. The SLFP won a landslide that surprised even Bandaranaike. He is reported to have told an interviewer: “You know, my dear fellow, I have never found anything to excite the people in quite the way this [Sinhala] language issue does.”

Soon after coming to power Bandaranaike implemented a Sinhala-only language policy, which replaced English with Sinhala as the official state language, directly discriminating against the Tamil minority who were now compelled to use a language that they did not speak or write for official communications. Many colleges, which had previously been streamed as Sinhala, Tamil and English, were forced to teach in Sinhala—a policy that was extended to denominational schools taken over by the state in the early 1960s.

In 1958 the government forced all state employees to take a Sinhala language proficiency test—those who failed or refused to take the exam were forced to retire. The aim was to ensure that Sinhala Buddhists dominated in the upper echelons of the state bureaucracy and the military which was increasingly recruited from elite Buddhist schools and colleges. A Buddhist council was established in the military funded by compulsory deductions from the salaries of soldiers.

Protests by Tamils were answered with pogroms and state repression. Bandaranaike, who had played the chief role in stirring up chauvinist sentiment, failed to go as far as the Sinhala extremists demanded and was assassinated in 1959 by a Buddhist monk.

The LSSP's response

The LSSP, which had unified with the BLPI in 1950, formally opposed the SLFP and took a principled stand against its Sinhala-only policy. Its parliamentarians warned that by elevating one language and discriminating against another the bourgeoisie was laying the basis for ethnic conflict and war. “Parity (for Sinhala and Tamil languages), we believe is the road to the freedom of our nation and the unity of its component. Otherwise two torn little bleeding states may yet arise of one little state,” Colvin R. de Silva warned. The LSSP also mobilised its youth leagues in parts of Colombo to physically defend Tamils and their houses from Sinhala racist thugs.

But under the pressure of the SLFP campaign, the LSSP was itself beginning to adapt to the framework of parliamentary politics and Sinhala chauvinism. Its attitude to Buddhism was ambivalent. The LSSP maintained that Buddhism was “a private matter,” which was correct insofar as it referred to the defence of the religious freedom of the individual from state interference. But increasingly this formula became a cover for the failure of the party to criticise the growing integration of Buddhism into the affairs of state. Marxists have always insisted on the separation of church and state—the principle forged in the democratic revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe to ensure equal status to all, regardless of religious belief.

Some of the LSSP's prominent leaders, such as parliamentarian N.M. Perera, never gave up practicing Buddhism. Within the Marxist party and in the struggle for a scientific, socialist culture in the working class, religion has never been “a private matter”. While protesting any instance of religious persecution, Marxists are fundamentally opposed to all forms of religion and mysticism, which only serve to inculcate passive acceptance of the status quo and to promote the view that social change, if indeed it is needed at all, will be achieved by supernatural forces, not the working class and oppressed masses.

The LSSP's political degeneration was not solely its own responsibility. It was encouraged and abetted by an opportunist trend that emerged within

the Fourth International headed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. In the aftermath of World War II, the Pabloites adapted themselves to the restabilisation of capitalism and the apparent strength of the existing labour bureaucracies by effectively abandoning any independent political role for the working class or for the Trotskyist movement. Calling for the “real integration into the mass movement wherever it expresses itself in each country,” Pablo insisted that the sections of the Fourth International in each country accommodate to the dominant Stalinist, Social Democratic or bourgeois nationalist leaderships. That outlook was expressed in Sri Lanka in the LSSP's growing adaptation to the SLFP and to Sinhala-Buddhist communalism.

While the LSSP leaders, initially at least, took certain orthodox positions on issues outside Sri Lanka, they did not break from Pablo and Mandel and never joined the International Committee of the Fourth International, formed in 1953 to defend the principles of Marxism. The relationship between the Pabloite United Secretariat and the LSSP was based on an opportunist quid pro quo: in return for being able to tout the LSSP as the “largest Trotskyist party in the world,” the United Secretariat gave its political blessing to the LSSP's increasingly obvious accommodation to Bandaranaike and the SLFP.

The LSSP's political backsliding culminated in its entry into the SLFP-led government headed by Bandaranaike's widow in 1964. One of the first acts of the new LSSP ministers was to receive the blessing of the chief priests and to publicly worship Sri Lankan Buddhism's most venerated relic—what is claimed to be the tooth of the Buddha. The LSSP dropped its longstanding defence of the rights of Tamil speaking plantation workers and supported the pact reached between Bandaranaike and the Indian Prime Minister Shastri to repatriate most of them to India.

When an SLFP-led government again came to power in 1970, LSSP minister Colvin R. de Silva, in direct opposition to what he had said and written in the 1940s and 1950s, oversaw the drafting of a new constitution which enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and reaffirmed Sinhala as the official language.

The Bandaranaike government of the 1970s introduced other discriminatory measures. Ethnic quotas were introduced to ensure that Sinhalese students predominated in universities. These were further reinforced by the notorious “standardisation” regulations which blatantly worked against Tamils. In the public sector, similar measures were taken. Top management positions in the newly nationalised trading corporations were all handed to Sinhala-speaking Buddhists—even in the plantation sector with its Tamil-speaking workforce. The provision of government credit and the building of transport and communication infrastructure was also aimed at benefitting Sinhala businessmen against Tamils.

Herein lie the real origins of the LTTE—not in the distant past of the Tamil Hindu revivalist movement.

Bandaranaike's policies fueled ethnic tensions and directed frustrations along racial and religious lines. In this climate, new political tendencies began to emerge. In the north and east, Tamils, frustrated at the systematic official discrimination and the compromising attitude of the Tamil parties, increasingly turned to militant separatism. The LTTE was formed among members of the youth wing of the bourgeois Federal Party and began launching terrorist attacks in support of their demand for a separate Tamil Eelam.

A parallel process took place in the south of the country. In the past, significant sections of the rural masses looked to the LSSP and the working class to provide a way out of the desperate situation they confronted. Now, however, the LSSP was part of the government responsible for the unemployment and widespread poverty. Disaffected Sinhalese rural youth no longer saw the possibility of a class solution to their plight and were attracted to the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), which was based on an eclectic mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala chauvinism.

The chief responsibility for the growing popularity of these racially-based, petty bourgeois movements lay with the LSSP, which, by abandoning its socialist principles, blocked the development of an independent, revolutionary movement of the working class offering its own class solution to the social crisis created by capitalism. The 1953 hartal had demonstrated the capacity of the working class to win to its side significant layers of the oppressed rural masses—both Tamil and Sinhalese—on the basis of the LSSP's socialist perspective. By embracing Sinhala-Buddhist communalism, the LSSP ensured that these social layers either remained under the influence of the two major bourgeois parties or turned to the LTTE and JVP.

Internationalism

Before finishing let me make two more points.

Like all petty bourgeois nationalists, you sneer at the internationalist slogans of Marxism, which you regard as completely unviable and utopian. “The noble vision,” you write, “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.” You then go on to inform us that if a United States of Eelam and Sri Lanka is ever going to be formed then it will be the outcome of diplomatic negotiations between sovereign states.

Again, the way you pose the issue is revealing. It may appear to you as a rather small terminological question but the actual slogan advanced by the SEP in Sri Lanka is for a United *Socialist* States of Eelam and Sri Lanka as part of a United *Socialist* States of South Asia. But contained in the presence or absence of the word “socialist” are two diametrically opposed sets of perspectives, programs and methods of struggle. Perhaps the omission is accidental, but at the very least it shows that whether a Tamil Eelam is capitalist or socialist is a matter of complete indifference to you.

This is related to a more fundamental issue. Socialism will only be established out of profound revolutionary upheavals. The United Socialist States, whether on the island of Sri Lanka or more broadly across the Indian subcontinent, will not emerge, as you suggest, from a series of voluntary acts by independent and equal states, but rather out of revolutionary struggles, which will draw together the working class and oppressed masses from different ethnic, linguistic and religious backgrounds around common class demands. The slogan is thus a guide to revolutionary action by Sinhalese and Tamil workers, not a template for diplomatic negotiations between capitalist nation states.

The USSR—Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—emerged precisely out of the revolutionary convulsions of 1917, which drew together workers and layers of the peasantry from different national backgrounds in a common struggle to maintain and deepen the gains of the revolution. Insofar as national separatist tendencies emerged they were invariably bound up with the machinations of outright reactionaries and the major powers, and were broadly seen as such by the masses. Moreover, the enormous attractive power of the Russian Revolution for the working class reached far beyond the borders of the USSR, demonstrating the possibility of a broader association of socialist states on an international scale.

Far from being utopian, the Marxist perspective of proletarian internationalism is based on the fact that capitalism has integrated the world economy into a mighty, interconnected whole. Over the past two or three decades, the globalisation of production processes based on advances in computers and communications technology has brought workers in different countries into closer and closer interdependence. Sri Lankan workers, whatever their ethnic or religious background, are well aware that their jobs, wages and conditions are determined by the international markets, not national conditions. What is completely utopian is the idea that a capitalist Tamil Eelam would be any more “independent” than the present Sri Lankan state or any more capable of improving the

living standards of the working class and masses.

One final point.

Like SR, you claim that the SEP's criticisms of the LTTE's program and perspective only play into the hands of the Sri Lankan ruling class and the army. Without a shred of evidence or any examination of the SEP's record, you assert that the SEP's opposition to the LTTE, notwithstanding the party's call for the immediate withdrawal of troops from the north and east, is the reason why the SEP has been granted official electoral status and allowed to operate in army-controlled areas of the war-zones.

This is the same time-worn argument that opportunists have used against Marxism since its inception—to criticise is tantamount to helping reaction. The Trotskyist movement is well acquainted with slanders of this type. Stalin branded Trotsky as a “fascist” on the basis that his criticisms of the bureaucracy's policies played into the hands of Hitler, then proceeded to physically liquidate not only tens of thousands of Trotskyists but anyone who had any connection with the October Revolution or had ever expressed an original or critical thought. His protégé in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, who according to SR should have been uncritically supported, murdered leading Trotskyists in that country in the 1940s to stop their political exposure of his manoeuvres with imperialism.

The SEP's call for the withdrawal of troops and its criticisms of the LTTE are not new. If the Sri Lankan state has decided, after decades of rejecting the SEP's application for electoral recognition, to suddenly change its mind then this was bound up with the intense political crisis in Colombo and the need to find a way to prevent the SEP from becoming a focus for hostility to the government and the war. Perhaps by offering the SEP official recognition, it could be induced to modify and weaken its policies? The answer to that challenge was given by the SEP leadership in its election statement and many other articles: it used the election to condemn the government, oppose the war and continue the fight for socialist policies.

As for the SEP's ability to function in the country's war-zones or anywhere else in Sri Lanka for that matter, this has always been dependent on the party's ability to fight for its democratic rights and win support in the working class and oppressed masses. The SEP has waged campaigns, not just for the release of its members from police custody, but also against the arbitrary detention in 1998 of four members in the Vanni region, where the LTTE functions as a quasi-state authority. The fact that the LTTE leadership resorts to the same methods as the Sri Lankan state in an effort to intimidate and silence the party demonstrates an underlying class unity. From differing standpoints, both are deeply hostile to the SEP's revolutionary perspective, based on the working class.

Your insinuation that the SEP is in some way aiding the army is a crude concoction aimed at blocking the influence of the SEP among Tamils, and, should that fail, to justify other methods to silence its criticisms. But perhaps the implications of what you wrote were unintentional, in which case we would welcome a statement on your part withdrawing your unfounded accusations and unconditionally defending the right of the SEP to campaign for its program throughout the country, including in areas under LTTE control.



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