

A reply to an LTTE supporter

# Marxism and the national question in Sri Lanka

## Part One

**Peter Symonds**  
10 March 2001

*The following is part one 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]

Dear SK,

Many of the points in your email simply repeat what was written by your colleague SR to which Wije Dias has already replied in detail. I see no point in reiterating arguments which you have either ignored or failed to treat with any real seriousness. Neither of you appear to have read the ICFI statement entitled *The SEP and the fight for the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam*, published on December 1, 1998, which outlines in some detail the attitude of the international Trotskyist movement to the national question in general and the LTTE in particular.

But I will restate one fundamental point: Marxism is based on elaborating an independent perspective for the working class based on its historical interests. Our analysis is therefore based on class not on race, nation or ethnicity.

Based on a misreading of Lenin, you seem to believe that the job of Marxists is to become the camp-followers of separatist groups such as the LTTE, or if they appear to be betraying, to take on the leadership of the national movement. But the aim of Marxists is a very different one—not the establishment of separate nation states but the building of a unified political movement of the international working class to reconstruct society on socialist lines. As part of that task, we champion the democratic

rights of the working class and oppressed masses, including an end to all forms of national oppression—and are the only ones to consistently do so.

The relationship between the national question and the social question, which the 1998 ICFI statement dealt with in detail, is a complex one with a long history within the Marxist movement. As it explained, Lenin and the Bolsheviks advocated the slogan of the “right of self-determination” in the conditions of the early 20th century, when capitalist property relations were just emerging in many parts of the globe dominated by colonial and semi-colonial rule. In Russia, the tsarist regime ruled over numerous ethnic groups of radically divergent levels of economic development. Lenin's policy was aimed at overcoming the animosities created by tsarist oppression and combatting the influence of bourgeois leaders among the national minorities.

As Lenin explained, the right to self determination was a “negative” demand. It did not imply that the Bolsheviks advocated the creation of separate states but rather that the party opposed the brutal and oppressive measures used to maintain Russia's grip over these national minorities. Nowhere did Lenin advocate an uncritical approach to the various bourgeois and petty bourgeois leaderships whether of the Russian or the Estonian, Latvian or any other variety. Indeed his lengthy polemic against the Mensheviks centred on his insistence that the national bourgeoisie was incapable of waging a consistent struggle against the Tsarist autocracy or carrying out the national-democratic tasks.

Leon Trotsky drew a more far-reaching conclusion. In his theory of Permanent Revolution, he explained that the working class, in a political struggle against the vacillating bourgeoisie, could not only win the leadership of the oppressed masses and come to power but, having done so, could not halt at simply implementing the bourgeois democratic tasks. It would be compelled to make deep inroads into capitalist property relations as an integral part of the anti-capitalist struggle of the international proletariat.

As the ICFI statement explained: “The struggle against national oppression does not thereby lose any of its significance or urgency. But with the establishment of a revolutionary alliance of the oppressed under the leadership of the working class it is subsumed, like all the other democratic tasks, in the struggle for a new social order against the national bourgeoisie and imperialism.

“Conversely, national liberation is a political chimera insofar as it is separated from social liberation. While supporting the struggles of the Indian, Chinese and other colonial peoples for their national independence, Trotsky, writing on behalf of the Fourth International in 1940, warned: ‘Belated national states can no longer count upon an independent democratic development. Surrounded by decaying capitalism

and enmeshed in imperialist contradictions, the independence of a backward state will inevitably be semi-fictitious, and its political regime, under the influence of internal class contradictions and external pressure, will unavoidably fall into dictatorship against the people—such is the regime of the “People’s” party in Turkey, the Kuomintang in China; Gandhi’s regime will be similar tomorrow in India.’”

While your appeal for unconditional, by which you really mean uncritical, support for “the Tamils liberation struggle” has nothing in common with Lenin or Trotsky, it can be traced to some who claimed to represent Marxism but in fact betrayed its principles. It was the Stalinist bureaucracy that revived the old Menshevik theories and corrupted Lenin’s slogan of the “right to self determination” to justify slavish adaptation to bourgeois leaderships in backward capitalist countries. Among various radical tendencies “self-determination” has become synonymous with uncritical support for various separatist movements.

Since Lenin’s time there has been a further degeneration in the national movements. As Wije Dias explained in his reply, the basic character of these national liberation movements has profoundly altered under the impact of the globalisation of production. All of them, including the LTTE, have dropped their various anti-imperialist and even socialist pretensions and openly seek the patronage of one or other of the major powers in establishing their own statelet. In return, each of them offers up their “own” working class for exploitation by international investors.

The SEP’s main criticism of the LTTE is not that it is “betraying the national struggle half-way” but rather that, even if completely successful in achieving its own stated aims, it is incapable of fulfilling the needs of the vast majority of Tamils. What are the LTTE leaders going to do to lift the living standards of the working class and poor or to address the outstanding national and democratic issues? How are they going to be any different from the ANC in South Africa or the PLO in the Middle East? What will be their attitude to minority groups—Sinhalese and Tamil Muslims—currently living in the north and east of the island?

The LTTE leadership is incapable of answering such questions because to do so would reveal that, far from representing “all the classes in the Tamil nation,” they are based on a narrow petty bourgeois layer who, like the PLO and ANC, are seeking to do a deal with imperialism that would continue capitalist exploitation. Those workers, farmers, students and others who support the LTTE will soon find to their bitter disappointment that “national independence” is indeed a political chimera in a capitalist Tamil Eelam, completely subservient economically to international finance capital and politically to the major powers.

#### **The historical issues**

My purpose in replying to your email is not, however, simply to explain that you will find no support for your views in Lenin’s writings or those of any other Marxist, or to try to convince you to adopt our principles. You have made it abundantly clear that you have little time for Marxism, Marxists or the “model of ‘class struggle’” which you rather contemptuously regard as ideological baggage that gets in the way of uncritical support for the LTTE.

But, unlike SR, you have ventured into the realm of history. And in doing so, whether you are aware of it or not, you have managed to more fully reveal the reactionary implications of your rejection of Marxism and class analysis. By reinterpreting the history of Sri Lanka in terms of “race” and “nation,” you are not only compelled to omit or falsify much of the record of the Trotskyist movement but also to invest various Tamil and Sinhala racist and religious movements with a progressive character which they simply did not have.

Using “race” as your guiding criterion, you end up in the same boat as the ideologists of Sinhala chauvinism singing the praises of the Buddhist revivalist movement. In a number of places you repeat the basic idea that the Trotskyist movement “failed miserably to relate to the democratic essence of Sinhala Buddhist aspirations,” which you identify with the

Buddhist revivalist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries and figures such as Anagarika Dharmapala, who “confronted British rule in their own way”.

You also claim that the “real Tamil anti-colonial movement... initiated by Tamil patriots such as Arumugam Navalar... [was] whatever the inevitable limitations and inadequacies... 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.”

You then proceed to speculate that the “depressing post-colonial scenario”—the ethnic conflict that led to the present war—“was 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.”

In other words, the “failure” of socialists to adapt themselves uncritically to racist movements among the Sinhalese and Tamils or to campaign for division of the tiny island of Sri Lanka along communal lines is held to be the cause of the present bloody war. In fact, what you have managed to demonstrate is that any attempt to view the world through racist glasses inevitably winds up standing reality on its head.

As we will demonstrate, the movements to which you refer, insofar as they had an anti-colonial character, were essentially backward looking—seeking to maintain the position of the indigenous ruling elites and their cultural trappings against the impact of British colonialism. The fact that the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie was compelled to embrace these ideological roots, in opposition to the socialist movement, reveals its own complete incapacity to wage any sort of progressive struggle.

In the 1940s and early 1950s, the Trotskyist movement won to its side significant layers of workers—Sinhalese and Tamil—by campaigning for the class perspective based on the theory of Permanent Revolution in opposition to communalism and racism. Its real failure was that it adopted the policies that you now propose for the SEP. In the 1950s, the LSSP abandoned step by step the struggle against Sinhala racism and adapted itself to the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP). The process of political degeneration culminated in 1964 in its entry into the bourgeois government of Sirima Bandaranaike—a betrayal that had far-reaching consequences for the working class and led to the rise of racially based organisations such as the LTTE and JVP.

#### **The revivalist movements**

What was the nature of the early movements in Sri Lanka that you describe as essentially democratic and progressive?

The Buddhist revivalist movement emerged in British colonial Ceylon in the latter part of the 19th century, in reaction to the domination of political and economic life by the British and the English-educated, Christianised elites they had cultivated. Led and supported by wealthy Sinhalese landowners and businessmen such as Thomas Amarasinghe, Simon Perera Abeywardena and Don David Hewavitharana, its perspective was based on a return to the past. While the revivalists railed against colonial domination, their grievances reflected the concerns of those social layers—the Buddhist hierarchy, upper caste aristocrats, Sinhala-educated intellectuals and entrepreneurs—who had lost status and privileges under the British.

Hewavitharana, who later took on the religious title of Anagarika (a status between monk and layman) Dharmapala, was one of the chief ideologues of the movement. Drawing upon Sinhalese myths and Buddhist texts such as the 6th century *Mahavamsa*, he fashioned an ideology that proclaimed the Sinhalese to be a “unique race” descended from the Aryan peoples of northern India, defenders of Buddhism, who had turned the island into a “paradise... before destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals.”

He proclaimed a moral crusade against the British, writing: “Practices

which were an abomination to the ancient noble Sinhalese have today become tolerated under the influence of Semitic sociology: opium, arrack, alcohol, ganja and other poisons distributed in the villages without regard for the degenerating effect they have on men... The sweet, tender, gentle Aryan children of an ancient historical race are sacrificed at the altar of the whiskey-drinking, beef-eating, belly-god of heathenism. How long, oh how long, will unrighteousness last in Ceylon?"

While the revivalist movement was primarily directed against the British and not overtly anti-Tamil, its racist character was already evident in the attacks on Tamil Muslims. Shortly after the pogrom against Muslims organised by wealthy Sinhalese in 1915, Dharmapala wrote: "To the Sinhalese without Buddhism death is preferable. The British officials may shoot, hang... or do anything to the Sinhalese but there will always be bad blood between the Moors and the Sinhalese."

In the 1930s, the supporters of Buddhist revivalism openly sympathised with Nazi Germany and Hitler's racial theories of Aryan supremacy. A.E. Gunasinghe, who had formed the Ceylon Labor Party and organised the trade unions in Colombo, increasingly resorted to racism directed against workers from Kerala in southern India to combat the growing influence of the socialist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).

One writer in Gunasinghe's newspaper *Veeraya* (Hero) wrote in 1936 that the Sinhala race must have "a group of virtuous, steadfast people, with a leader... a hero of great virtue and courage... like Hitler, who was implementing policies for saving the Aryan race from degeneration." A letter writer in the same issue cited approvingly the Nazi ban on marriages with foreigners and Hitler's xenophobic statements that "the children of Aryan and non-Aryan marriages will be dangerously devoid of any virtue."

Precisely how should the emerging socialist movement have "related" to rightwing scum like Gunasinghe? Or to S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike who formed the Sinhala Maha Sabha or Great Sinhala Council (GSC) in 1932 with the aim of uniting Sinhalese on an explicitly racial and religious basis? It is a measure of the later political degeneration of the LSSP leaders that they abandoned the principled political position which they took in the 1930s and 1940s in opposition to the proponents of Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism.

In a speech in 1939, LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva correctly warned that Bandaranaike's Sinhala Maha Sabha was "a dangerously reactionary body. The nature of its appeal is obvious from the fact that it finds its best response in the politically backward Kandyan province and the more caste-ridden areas of the low country. In other circumstances it would have represented the local variant of brown Fascism; but as things are, it is doomed to defeat through lack of leadership, a steadily narrowing social base, and the nature of the historical forces. In any event it embodies only another form of bourgeois reaction."

The Tamil revivalist movement, which you extol, was little different in its basic political orientation from its Sinhala Buddhist counterpart in the south. Like Dharmapala, Arumugam Navalar, who you hail as a "Tamil patriot," sought to defend the interests of the traditional Tamil elites against the Christianised layers who had been cultivated by the British to buttress their colonial rule. To counter the influence of missionaries, he wrote polemical articles against Christianity from the standpoint of defending the virtues of Hinduism and founded religious schools of his own. Several of his books emphasised the importance of the Hindu caste system. As one Sri Lankan historian, commenting on Navalar and the "Hindu Renaissance", noted politely: "The movement that he led, however, strengthened [Hindu] orthodoxy and did little to ameliorate the rigours of the caste system".

The followers of Navalar established the Saiva Paripalana Sabha (Society for the Protection of Hinduism) in the north and later in Colombo in order to propagate Hinduism. Two of his prominent protégés—Ponnambalam Ramanathan and Ponnambalam Arunachalam,

brothers from a wealthy Jaffna family—were prominent in the island's politics. With the help of Navalar, Ramanathan became a member of the colonial legislative council and distinguished himself by opposing universal suffrage, defending the privileges of high caste Hindus and demonstrating his loyalty to British rule. For their services to colonial administration, Ramanathan and Arunachalam were both knighted by the British.

Such was the class nature of the "real Tamil anti-colonial movement" that you acclaim.

### **Independence**

You dismiss as completely irrelevant the stand taken by the Trotskyist movement in opposing the independence deal struck between the British and the local ruling elites—Sinhalese and Tamil. From your standpoint of Tamil nationalism, the fundamental issue of principle was "the unitary state arbitrarily imposed on a two-nation island". "Isn't it odd," you exclaim, "that the call for the United States of Eelam and Sri Lanka did not emerge from Trotskyists at the time!"

The issue of raising the slogan of a United Socialist States of Eelam and Sri Lanka simply did not arise as there was no significant movement among Tamils at the time for a separate state of Tamil Eelam. In fact, the Tamil bourgeois politicians of the day were "wobbly" not just on the issue of an independent Tamil state but also, like their Sinhalese counterparts, on the issue of independence as a whole.

Unlike India, where Gandhi, Nehru and other bourgeois politicians took part in leading the anti-colonial struggle, none of their counterparts in Sri Lanka played any significant role. The anti-colonial movement was led by the LSSP, which was illegalised in 1940 for its anti-war agitation and forced to operate underground. After escaping from jail in 1942 and fleeing to India, the leaders reconstituted the LSSP as an all-India party—the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI)—and a section of the Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International.

According to you, the task of the Sri Lankan socialists in the 1940s was to be the most consistent advocates for the creation of two separate nation states out of British Ceylon—even if no one was raising the issue at the time. If we transpose the issue to India, then, by the logic of your position, the BLPI leadership should have been in the forefront of proposing the division of the British Raj into a patchwork of nations corresponding to the myriad of so-called national independence movements that emerged in later decades in Kashmir, the Punjab, Tamil Nadu and various north-eastern states.

We can take the matter one step further. If the Trotskyist movement "failed miserably to relate" to Buddhist and Hindu revivalist movements in Sri Lanka, then it should also be condemned for not recognising the "democratic character" of communalist movements such as the Muslim League and its demand for a separate nation of Pakistan. Presumably, the Marxists should therefore have lauded the fact that British imperialism divided the subcontinent on religious lines into Pakistan and India with all its consequences, including the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in communal violence. After all, if the British had done the same in Sri Lanka—establishing a Hindu Eelam in the north and east and a Buddhist Sri Lanka in the south—that would have contributed to the fulfillment of your perspective.

The Trotskyist movement correctly opposed such reactionary currents at the time. The BLPI leadership based its perspective on building a party to unite the working class not just in Sri Lanka but throughout the Indian subcontinent. It pointed out that the British decision, in collusion with the bourgeoisie in Ceylon, to create a separate nation state of Sri Lanka was aimed at establishing a secure base of operations from which to protect its interests on the turbulent subcontinent. The BLPI explained that Britain was seeking to make Sri Lanka an "Asiatic Ulster, a bastion for Empire against the long-overdue Indian revolution," adding that the "Ceylonese

bourgeoisie was quite ready to be bribed and pampered into allowing the British to point a pistol at the heart of India from Ceylon.”

The BLPI pointed to the phony character of the independence settlements reached in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Imperialism had simply handed over the task of looking after its interests to the native bourgeoisie, which remained completely dependent on the major powers economically and subservient to them politically. The BLPI explained in its statement: “[T]he new status of their obtaining is not only not independence but also actually a refashioning of chains of Ceylon’s slavery to British imperialism. It is a continuation of British imperialism’s method of exercising that role... The native exploiting classes of Ceylon has been handed over, well nigh completely the task of administering British imperialism’s interests in Ceylon.”

The abject character of such arrangements was particularly graphic in Sri Lanka, where the political representatives of the capitalist class such as D.S. Senanayake had only belatedly—to undercut the growing support for the Trotskyists—begun to enter discussions on independence. It was only in 1946—at the last minute, historically speaking—that the bourgeoisie even formed its own political party—the United National Party (UNP).

One historian described the process as follows: “[In 1947] the negotiations at Whitehall [the colonial office in London] were handled by O. E. Goonatilleke [a state council minister] on Senanayake’s behalf. At Whitehall there was a clear understanding that Senanayake and his associates were facing increasing pressure from left wing forces, apart from other critics, and that the immediate grant of Dominion Status was now an urgent if not compelling necessity to ensure their political survival.”

The BLPI boycotted the official handover ceremonies and called a demonstration on Galle Face Green in central Colombo to oppose the fraudulent character of independence and the constitution imposed by the British. Over 50,000 people answered the call, serving notice to the UNP government that the working class regarded it as little more than a flunkey of the privileged elite.

Following independence, contrary to what you imply, the Trotskyist movement was able to build a substantial following in the working class—both Tamil and Sinhalese—precisely because of its principled defence of basic democratic rights. While sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie in Jaffna acquiesced in the UNP government’s decision to strip away the citizenship rights of hundreds of thousands of Tamil plantation workers, the BLPI vigorously opposed the reactionary citizenship laws, warning that the UNP was applying the principle of fascism that “the state must be coeval with the nation, and the nation with the race.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**