

Sri Lankan LSSP offers its services to big business as an advocate of peace

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The current moves in Sri Lanka for a peace deal to the country's long-running civil war have again highlighted the political degeneration of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which, on the basis of a struggle for Trotskyism, was once the island's largest working class party. In 1964, after a protracted period of backsliding, the LSSP abandoned the fundamental principles of socialist internationalism and joined the capitalist government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike. In doing so, it openly embraced the ideology of Sinhala chauvinism that animates the ruling elites in Colombo.

The LSSP's betrayal and its participation in Bandaranaike's coalition governments contributed directly to the growth of communalist tendencies, leading to formation of separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) among disenchanted Tamil youth and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) among young unemployed Sinhalese in the rural south. The cynical exploitation of chauvinist sentiment by the successive Colombo governments ultimately led to the outbreak of a civil war in 1983, which has had a devastating impact on working people—at least 60,000 are dead and many more have been injured or turned into refugees.

Today, however, the interests of big business have shifted. The war has had disastrous consequences for the economy and the prospects for attracting international investment. The country is on the verge of defaulting on its foreign debt and last year economic growth was negative. The Sri Lankan army has suffered a series of major defeats over the last three years, effectively ruling out any military solution. As a result, corporate interests have been pushing, increasingly insistently, for a negotiated end to the war.

The major powers are also concerned that continuing instability on the island could further inflame tensions in South Asia where, for the last six months, India and Pakistan have been on the brink of war. Repeated interventions by high-ranking US and European officials made clear that the LTTE must give up its demand for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island and reach an agreement with Colombo. In February, the two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for a ceasefire that was to lay the basis for negotiations in Thailand in May.

But the proposed dates for talks continue to be put back. The

United National Front (UNF) coalition of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe faces exactly the same political problem as other governments that have attempted to negotiate an end to the war. Having prosecuted the war and promoted chauvinist sentiment, the ruling class has created a potent chauvinist lobby led by layers of the Buddhist clergy, military, state bureaucracy and business that have profited from the war. It wields considerable influence in both major Sinhala parties—Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) and the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Just two years ago, Kumaratunga attempted to push constitutional changes through parliament that were to form the basis for peace talks. She was blocked by the UNP, which succumbed to a campaign by the Buddhist hierarchy and various Sinhala extremist parties denouncing the proposals as a betrayal. Today the shoe is on the other foot. Wickremesinghe is attempting to push for negotiations and Kumaratunga's SLFP-led coalition—the Peoples Alliance (PA)—along with the JVP, are accusing the government of selling out to the LTTE and preparing to divide the island.

In this situation, the LSSP, which is a PA coalition partner, has stepped forward as the most consistent advocate for the most powerful sections of big business that want an end to the war. Immediately after the ceasefire agreement was signed, the LSSP urged on the government, declaring: "Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe as Prime Minister has not failed to urge the position that he secured in the last parliamentary election a mandate for peace. He cannot be dilly-dallying on this." LSSP leader Batty Weerakoon insisted that the opposition PA could not ignore the MoU "and has the obligation to respond accordingly to what has been placed before it".

The LSSP chided Kumaratunga for objecting to details of the MoU, stating it was of the opinion that "matters of process and procedure should not be of supermost concern in a discussion of the agreement. What is urgently necessary is an adequate discussion and evaluation and of the provisions and their implications on the government's obligation to secure adequately the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka in all circumstances..."

Weerakoon and the LSSP leaders made ritual appeals for a

“progressive platform” to support the government moves to talks. Its main service, however, has been to give voice to one of the central demands of big business, which has been calling for a grand coalition between the major parties to push through a peace settlement. The more astute members of the ruling elite view a “national unity” government as the only means for isolating the influence of the Sinhala extremists.

Weerakoon emphasised that “LSSP is firmly of the view” that UNF and the PA “must together make a commitment to the position that the political solution to the ethnic problem has to be a bipartisan matter.” As far back as 1998 the chambers of commerce and industry invited all political parties and organisations to a conference to avoid rivalry and work out a common approach. Not only did the LSSP participate in that meeting but campaigned for it by organising meetings and pickets.

Following the signing of the MoU, Weerakoon wrote to Wickremesinghe asking him to establish an all-party select committee ostensibly to monitor the ceasefire but in fact to back the peace talks. When the prime minister first welcomed then rejected the suggestions, Weerakoon issued a further appeal to the government to involve “parliament and the civil society” in the peace process.

Weerakoon’s pathetic pleas to the conservative UNP leader for a role in the so-called peace process are a desperate attempt to revive both his own and the LSSP’s fortunes. The party is a little more than a bureaucratic shell and the remains of a trade union apparatus, neither of which command a great deal of respect nor support in the working class. In the 2001 national elections, the LSSP won only one seat and that with a Buddhist monk as its candidate. So inconsequential has the standing of the LSSP become that Kumaratunga deleted Weerakoon’s name from the PA’s national list of MPs and thus deprived him of his parliamentary seat.

The LSSP’s appeal for “peace” has nothing to do with defending the interests of the oppressed masses or of mobilising them against the reactionary war. The party supports the plans of the ruling class for a negotiated settlement that maintains the Sri Lankan capitalist state and devolves limited powers to the regions. The proposal amounts to a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim elites for their mutual exploitation of the working class. The plan would further entrench communal divisions and set the stage for a new round of tension and conflict.

Where the LSSP has been critical of the government, it has been from the standpoint of defending the Sri Lankan state and the armed forces. In a letter to the prime minister, Weerakoon insisted that the MoU should not prevent the army from intercepting the LTTE military supplies or and checking its “extortions and abductions”. He stated that “the armed forces must be empowered to engage in offensive military operations against any attempt to move LTTE military hardware to any area under the control of the Sri Lankan government.”

The LSSP has supported the lifting of the current ban on the LTTE—one of the key remaining obstacles to the start of any talks. Opposition to deproscription is a major focus for the campaign being waged by Sinhala extremist groups. While declaring that de-banning was not “sacrosanct” and should not stand in the way of discussions, the LSSP has insisted that it must be linked to a renunciation of “terrorism” by the LTTE—by which it means an end to the LTTE’s military operations. The party emphasised that any settlement could not include “the handing over of the administration of the Northern and Eastern province to an armed LTTE.”

Nearly four decades after it betrayed the principles of socialist internationalism and entered the Bandaranaike government, the LSSP has thoroughly integrated itself into the framework of bourgeois politics. In 1964, the LSSP argued that its alliance with the “progressive” SLFP was essential to prevent the right-wing UNP from coming to power. Today the LSSP leaders cautiously praise the same UNP for its “progressive” role in attempting to bring about talks with the LTTE.

In the 1970s, the LSSP was instrumental in framing the country’s discriminatory constitution and other anti-Tamil measures that ultimately provoked civil war. In 1994, LSSP leaders assumed ministerial posts in the Kumaratunga administration that promised to end the war but only intensified it. Now, in an effort to stave off its further decline, the party is offering its services to the ruling class once again, this time as an advocate of “peace”.

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