

Sri Lankan SEP replies to a right-wing supporter of the LTTE

13 February 2003

In the following exchange, the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka replies to an email from a supporter of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) defending the organisation's involvement in the peace negotiations with the Colombo government. The email was sent in response to an article by K. Ratnayake, a member of the World Socialist Web Site editorial board, on the LTTE's call for the SEP supporters to be "wiped out" on the northern island of Kayts.

Dear Mr. Ratnayake,

Your argument to justify your opposition to the peace talks is puerile. Equally your claim that "The SEP is not against peace, but against the rotten deal being negotiated by the LTTE with the Sri Lankan government in closed door 'peace talks' sponsored by the major powers and big business. Both sides are exploiting the legitimate yearnings of ordinary working people for an end to the war in order to establish a power sharing agreement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ruling elites" is tall talk. There are no industrialists or landlords among the Tamils. The ordinary working people are not with you. They are with the LTTE.

If the Tamils have to wait for the ordinary working people's revolution you are dreaming about, then they have to wait till thy kingdom come! One has to be realistic. You may put your head in the sky, but you should place your feet on earth!

Who will finance the reconstruction of war devastated northeast other than the "major powers and big business?" Will the SEP give one dollar towards reconstruction and rehabilitation when you yourself are soliciting donations?

Now speaking about "elitist" what about your good self? Are you not an English-speaking elitist and not "an ordinary working people?"

The Tamil people cannot easily forget the summersaults performed by Trotskyites like Dr. N.M. Perera and Dr. Colvin R de Silva in the sixties and seventies. Your Trotskyism is a discredited and moth eaten theory. After the collapse of the Soviet Union it is ridiculous to speak about working class, capitalism and socialism!

At least the Stalinists and Maoists succeeded in creating socialist states for a while, but the Trotskyites like you are trying for over 90 years without any success.

You have a few supporters in Kayts, but make a big noise. I don't think you have succeeded in getting elected to any of the governing bodies either in the North or the South.

You have quoted Balasingham's statement "We are not asking for the dismantling of the armed forces, army camps or military complexes.... We are not asking the army to withdraw" out of context. You may think you are clever by scoring a debating point, but you are dishonest! You should view his statement in the right context viz in the context of dismantling the HSZs and resettling the IDPs. If you want to pick holes in this fashion you can do so, but it will be an exercise in futility.

You say "Throughout the 19-year war, the Sri Lankan Trotskyites have intransigently demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan army from the north and east of the island and campaigned vigorously against the repression of Tamils." Yes you did the easiest thing on earth,

sorry in the cyber space! The LTTE did the difficult task of fighting the Sinhala armed forces by sacrificing over 17,648 cadres!

Finally, I don't want to give legitimacy to your exaggerated egos by engaging in a debate with you. But I certainly respect your right to air your pet and sterile theories! Again in the cyber space!

Thangavelu

Dear Mr Thangavelu,

The points you raise in your email simply confirm the argument in my article: that through the so-called peace process, the LTTE is subordinating the Tamil masses to the interests of the major powers and big business. You pour scorn on the working class, socialism and the Socialist Equality Party in order to justify, in the name of realism, a powersharing arrangement that will quickly prove to be a disaster for all working people—Tamil, Muslim and Sinhala alike.

You try to clinch your case by exclaiming: who else will finance the reconstruction of war devastated northeast other than the major powers and big business! International capital, however, is not interested in lifting the living standards of ordinary people but in finding the cheapest sources of labour. If a pittance in international aid is provided for relief and "reconstruction" in the northeast, its purpose will be to secure the conditions necessary for investors to carry through the exploitation of the working class.

The LTTE has already demonstrated its willingness to implement the required economic measures in the hope that it will be allocated a role, however small, in the new regime being hammered out in the current talks. The LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham has formally abandoned the demand for an independent statelet of Tamil Eelam and last September appealed to the government "to embrace the Tamil Tigers as equal partners" in transforming "the island into a successful Tiger economy." As everyone knows "Tiger economy" refers to the cheap labour sweatshops that have been created throughout Asia.

The LTTE is treading the same well-worn path as the ANC in South Africa, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, the PLO in the Middle East and Fretilin in East Timor, and the outcome is entirely predictable. A small group of LTTE leaders will exchange their jungle fatigues for business suits and lucrative government and corporate positions. One of their central functions will be the ruthless suppression of the vast majority of ordinary people as resentment and hostility grows to their IMF-dictated economic and social program.

You attempt to justify the LTTE's policies by claiming that the SEP's alternative is "pie in the sky". To bolster your case, you refer to the "summersaults performed by Trotskyites like Dr. N.M. Perera and Colvin R. de Silva in the sixties and seventies" as if the mere invocation proves your conclusion that "Trotskyism is a discredited and moth eaten theory". In fact, if one goes beyond name-calling, history demonstrates the very opposite of what you allege.

Interestingly, you make no reference to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) prior to the 1960s. In the 1940s and 1950s, the LSSP leadership, including Perera and de Silva, demonstrated conclusively that it was

possible to build a powerful movement of the working class based on the principles of socialist internationalism—that is, Trotskyism. The LSSP won the allegiance of the most far-sighted and self-sacrificing layers of workers, young people and the intelligentsia—Tamil and Sinhala—through an intransigent struggle to unite the working class against the communalist politics advanced by the Sri Lankan ruling class.

The LSSP vigorously opposed the attacks on the democratic rights of the Tamil minority. In 1948, when the United National Party government introduced the Citizenship Bill to strip Tamil-speaking plantation workers of their rights, Colvin R. de Silva denounced the proposal and correctly warned that such discrimination would inevitably be extended to all Tamils.

Pointing to the shortsightedness of a section of the Tamil elite who supported the anti-democratic measure, de Silva declared: “It may be replied that, for instance, Jaffna Tamils do not come under this allegation but... the moment a government starts applying an anti-racial principle against a particular group, from that to the positive racial principle in relation to a particular racial group is not only a short but easy step.”

On the basis of the struggle to unify the working class, the LSSP came to the leadership of the 1953 Hartal (strike movement) that shook Sri Lankan capitalism to the core. As the Hartal against deteriorating living standards gathered strength, the cabinet was forced to cower aboard a British warship docked in Colombo harbour. Recognising its political weakness, a section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie consciously turned to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and its openly communal politics.

The LSSP opposed Bandaranaike’s “Sinhala only” policy, which stripped Tamil of its status as an official language and reduced Tamils to second-class citizens. During a debate in parliament N.M. Perera argued for parity for the status of the Sinhala and Tamil languages and prophetically warned: “If you compel these people in the Northern and Eastern provinces to accept Sinhalese only as the state language and Tamil a regional language, it will lead to so much rioting, bloodshed and civil war.”

The treacherous role of the LSSP’s leaders in the 1960s and 70s was a product, not of their adherence to socialist principles, or the failure of Trotskyism to win a mass following, but the reverse. The party began to adapt to the powerful pressures exerted by the national milieu and to abandon the very principles on which it had been based. To justify their opportunist accommodation to Sri Lankan nationalism, the LSSP leadership advanced precisely the same arguments as you do: the struggle for socialist revolution was deemed “unrealistic”, to be replaced with a more “realistic” alternative—bourgeois parliamentary politics and the Sinhala chauvinism of the SLFP.

The outcome was a monumental betrayal of Trotskyism, when the LSSP joined the capitalist government of Mrs Bandaranaike in 1964. For the working class, in Sri Lanka and internationally, the political consequences were disastrous. In Sri Lanka, the LSSP’s abandonment of the struggle to unify Tamil and Sinhala workers strengthened petty bourgeois tendencies based on communal politics—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), espousing Sinhala chauvinism in the south, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), advancing Tamil separatism in the north. In the final analysis, ultimate political responsibility for the outbreak of the civil war in 1983, that was to lead to the deaths of tens of thousands of workers and young people, lies with the LSSP’s abandonment of Trotskyism in the 1960s.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was the only political tendency that opposed the LSSP’s betrayal, probed its political roots and sought to reestablish the fight for the principles of socialist internationalism in the Sri Lankan working class. The Revolutionary Communist League (the SEP’s forerunner) was formed in 1968 on the basis of that political struggle.

For two decades, our party has vigorously opposed the racist war waged by successive Colombo governments with every means available to us, including in cyberspace as you disparagingly refer to the *World Socialist Web Site*. The RCL-SEP are widely known throughout Sri Lanka for our principled and intransigent campaign, in the face of severe state repression and murderous attacks by JVP gunmen, for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Sri Lankan troops from the north. You simply display your own ignorance when you mock the SEP’s struggle and the heavy price its cadre have had to pay.

It comes as no surprise that you subscribe to the “socialism is dead” rhetoric purveyed by every right-wing hack and pro-capitalist ideologue. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, represented not the failure of socialism but of its antithesis: the reactionary nationalist perspective of “socialism in one country” on which the Stalinist bureaucracy was based.

The seizure of power by the working class in Russia in the October 1917 revolution was guided by the perspective elaborated by Lenin and Trotsky—that the building of socialism required the extension of the revolution to the major capitalist centres. In the wake of the defeat of revolutionary movements in Europe and China in the 1920s, Stalin emerged and then consolidated his position as the representative of a bureaucratic apparatus which rejected the perspective of world socialist revolution and sought to consolidate its own privileged existence in Russia at the expense of the working class.

Far from ushering in a new age of capitalist peace and prosperity, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe were an initial expression of the historical obsolescence of all parties and programs based on national economic regulation, under the impact of the globalisation of production. Just over a decade after the demise of the USSR, the fundamental contradiction between the nation state system and world economy are once again erupting to the surface of political life—posing mankind, for the third time in a century, with the stark alternatives: socialism or barbarism.

Likewise, China has never been a socialist state. Mao concluded that responsibility for the defeat of the Chinese revolution of 1925-27 lay not with the criminal policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow but with the working class itself. He based himself on the peasantry and it was Mao’s peasant armies, not the working class, which took power in 1949 as the Chiang Kai Shek regime imploded. Mao’s own specific version of the Stalinist perspective of “socialism in one country” has seen China evolve organically into the world’s largest sweatshop, where many of the most brutal and primitive forms of exploitation that existed prior to the 1949 revolution have been revived.

Your palpable affinity with Stalinism and Maoism arises out of your repudiation of the principles of socialist internationalism as utopian and “unrealistic”, and your naïve faith in the permanence of world capitalism.

Allow me, in conclusion, to return to the issues that prompted your email.

Last October 12, David North, chairman of the WWS editorial board, replied to your letter to the *Asia Tribune*, in which you questioned the factual basis of WWS reports of LTTE threats and attacks on SEP members on Kayts Island. In your latest email, your concluding remarks appear to imply that you now concede that the democratic rights of the SEP have been under attack.

But if, as you allege, the SEP is of such little political significance, why would the LTTE bother? And what need would it have to “wipe out” the SEP and intimidate our members if its own position were so secure? The answer is obvious. The LTTE leadership knows that its promises of peace, prosperity and democratic rights will never be fulfilled. As this becomes increasingly evident in the daily lives of the Tamil people, opposition to the LTTE will grow in depth and breadth. Even among its current loyal supporters, the question will be raised: for what did we make all the sacrifices?

This is why the LTTE can tolerate no debate, discussion or criticism, above all from a party that advances a genuine alternative. What the LTTE fears is that principles and program for which the SEP has fought throughout the past three and a half decades is beginning to intersect with the concerns and aspirations of the Tamil masses as they seek a way out of the blind alley of communal politics.

We note that you maintain your silence on the LTTE's violence against the SEP. If you have the slightest respect for democratic rights, as you maintain, then, despite our obvious political differences, your only principled course of action is to issue a forthright and unequivocal condemnation of the LTTE's actions on Kayts Island.

Yours sincerely,

K. Ratnayake,

World Socialist Web Site



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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