

The NSSP, the “peace process” and the Sri Lankan elections

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The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) has stepped forward in the Sri Lankan election to play a thoroughly reprehensible role. In conditions where significant layers of workers, young people and intellectuals are deeply alienated from both major political parties, the NSSP and its “left” allies are promoting Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and his right-wing United National Front (UNF) as the “lesser evil” to President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her allies.

The NSSP is preying on widespread fears that Kumaratunga’s dismissal of the UNF government and her alliance with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) could plunge the country back to civil war. Moreover, the danger exists that Kumaratunga, having openly broken with parliamentary norms, will increasingly take power directly in her own hands. The role of the NSSP is to prop up the crumbling edifice of official politics and above all to prevent working people from turning to a revolutionary socialist alternative.

Just four days after Kumaratunga ousted the UNF on February 7, the NSSP held a press conference in Colombo to announce the formation of a new alliance—the New Left Front (NLF). The main spokesperson was NSSP leader Dr Wickramabahu Karunaratna. Also present were Democratic Left Front (DLF) leader Vavudeva Nanayakkara, who broke from the NSSP in 1994, and Chandra Kumarage from the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Alternative Group), a recent split from the LSSP. All three parties falsely claim to be socialist.

The NLF’s four-paragraph media statement was formally critical of the two major parties. It declared that Kumaratunga had “succumbed” to the pressure of “racists, religious sectarians and militaristic forces”. Wickremesinghe, on the other hand, “failed to stop this obstinate step” and “keeps bowing to global capitalism”. The people are caught between “a dangerous racist/capitalist camp” and “another capitalist camp who are dancing to the tune of global capital”.

The statement declared that the NLF was committed to building “a force to rescue the masses from their misery”. That “force”, however, is not the masses themselves. Explicitly rejecting any independent role for the working class, Karunaratna told the press conference that the purpose of the NLF was confined to “pressurising the coming government to defend peace and democracy”. DLF leader Vavudeva Nanayakkara declared that the front’s aim was to “take forward the peace process”.

In reality, in the name of defending the “peace process”, the NSSP and DLF have been more and more openly accommodating to Wickremesinghe, promoting the UNF as a preferable alternative to the alliance between the JVP and Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). In doing so, the two parties are directly subordinating the interests of the working class to those of the ruling class and global capital.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the role of the NSSP and DLF in assisting the government to suppress a rising tide of strikes and protests against its economic restructuring program. NSSP and DLF leaders have met privately with senior government ministers on several occasions, including with Wickremesinghe on January 5, to offer their support in the

conflict with Kumaratunga and to provide advice on how to deal with the strike movement.

When a strike by 17,000 rail workers erupted in late January against corporatisation, the small NSSP-led technical union joined with other pro-UNF unions in signing a deal with the government to postpone its plans and shut down all industrial action. NSSP leader Karunaratne defended the decision, declaring at a press conference that it was his party’s “duty” to stop the strike to allow the government to carry forward the “peace process.”

At an NLF meeting on March 2, Karunaratna justified his support for Wickremesinghe by declaring: “We have to join even with Mahsona [the devil of devils] to establish peace.” If a left government cannot be formed, he told the audience, the people have to form a government which is working for the peace. “We are requesting Ranil [Wickremesinghe] to gather all those who want peace and to go forward to establish peace.”

The “peace process”

For nearly two decades, successive governments demanded that workers sacrifice for the war. Now, the NLF is telling workers that they have no alternative but to support Wickremesinghe and the UNF—“the devil of devils”—and to sacrifice their living standards for the “peace”.

The NLF’s uncritical identification of peace with the UNF’s “peace process” involves a cynical sleight of hand. It assumes that the only alternative to the dangers posed by Kumaratunga’s JVP-SLFP alliance is the UNF, even though Wickremesinghe’s own United National Party (UNP) began the civil war and has a long history of destroying living standards and trampling on democratic rights. As far as the NLF is concerned, it is impossible for the working class to advance its own solution to the war in opposition to the schemes proposed by the major powers and big business.

What is the “peace process” that the NLF so enthusiastically backs?

For years, its foreign backers—the US, Japan and the European powers—either ignored the ongoing bloodshed in Sri Lanka or actively supported the government forces in their racist war. Their promotion of “peace” is not based on humanitarian concern for the Sri Lankan people, but stems from the growing economic and strategic importance of the Indian subcontinent. In the 1990s, global investors flocked to India to take advantage of its cheap, highly educated labour to provide a wide range of office, computer and technical services, transforming the country into what is sometimes termed the “office of the world”.

The US became more directly involved in Sri Lanka following the installation of the Bush administration and particularly after the September 11 attacks on the US. Under the banner of the “war on terrorism”, the US has invaded Afghanistan and, in alliance with the

Hindu supremacist regime in New Delhi, sought to impose its agenda throughout a region that is strategically located next to the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Like the ongoing insurgencies in Kashmir and Nepal, the US regards the civil war in Sri Lanka as an obstacle to its ambitions in the region. The Bush administration has backed the “peace process” to ensure that the conflict does not further destabilise an already highly volatile region, particularly neighbouring southern India, where much of the global investment in computer technology and services is concentrated. The White House only supports a negotiated peace insofar as it meets US interests. The continued US designation of the LTTE as a “terrorist organisation” carries the obvious threat that Washington will back a renewed and heightened war by the Sri Lankan military if the LTTE fails to toe the line.

In Colombo, the “peace process” is supported by corporate and financial leaders who have become increasingly frustrated that the war has sidelined the island from investment opportunities opening up in India. At their urging, Wickremesinghe has pressed ahead with peace talks and a sweeping program of economic reform aimed at transforming the country into a regional base for global capital—the Singapore of South Asia. Chief LTTE negotiator Anton Balasingham signalled his organisation’s enthusiastic support when he declared at the first round of talks in 2002 that Sri Lanka had to become “a Tiger economy”.

From the outset, therefore, the “peace process” has been directed against the needs and aspirations of the majority of the population. Negotiations have taken place behind closed doors between competing sections of the island’s ruling elites—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—to effect a power-sharing deal. The structure of the talks is an expression of the communalism that permeates every aspect of official politics in Sri Lanka.

No final deal has even been proposed, let alone agreed. But the various plans for an interim administration in the North and East share the same anti-democratic and communal features as the talks themselves. Both the LTTE and the government propose the establishment of a body comprising Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim representatives chosen according to a formula reflecting the size of each community. The proposed administration would be imposed without any popular vote. Far from ending communal tensions, such an arrangement would only institutionalise ethnic and religious divisions and pave the way not for peace, but for future conflict.

The NLF’s “civil force”

At last month’s press conference, the NLF called on “all leftist progressive parties and leaders” to build “a civil force” to “salvage the peace process and take it forward”. The civil force was also needed “to defend the people’s democracy and freedom” and “to protect the people’s living conditions from the iron boots of foreign powers”.

To whom is the NLF appealing and what is this “civil force”? The NLF press statement declared that “we expect the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Sri Lanka Communist Party (CP) to join this front.” Within days, however, these old “workers” parties had signed up to the JVP-SLF—that is, they had openly joined what the NLF branded the “dangerous racist/capitalist camp”.

In the past, the NSSP and DLF might have used their own trade union apparatus to muster support for their campaigns. But as in other countries, the Sri Lankan trade unions have been crucial in assisting the government in imposing the agenda of economic restructuring and privatisations. Decades of betrayals have led to widespread disgust among workers. The NSSP and DLF’s own wretched record has resulted in the virtual collapse

of their previously significant union base.

The NLF’s appeal for “a civil force” is oriented in another direction: to the plethora of non-government organisations or “NGOs” that have sprung up in recent decades in Sri Lanka. These NGOs are part of an extensive international network that has emerged throughout the so-called Third World, particularly as the old political safety valves—the trade unions, bourgeois nationalist and reformist parties—have become exhausted. The NGOs make no pretence at being working class organizations, but are formations supported and funded, directly or indirectly, by sections of the local bourgeoisie and the major imperialist centres. While the NGOs espouse a wide variety of causes, their chief function is to prevent the explosive social and class tensions in countries like Sri Lanka from taking an overtly revolutionary direction.

The NSSP and DLF have ties with a number Sri Lankan NGOs, particularly those established to help sell the “peace process”. These include the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka and the Centre for Policy Alternatives, both of which have close connections with a wide range of local and foreign institutions, including local business groups. The National Peace Council receives funding from government aid agencies in the US, Japan, Norway and other EU countries. Other NGOs such as Saravodaya, originally confined to rural issues, have started their own peace program. Saravodaya receives money from sources in 35 countries, including the US and Europe.

The NSSP and DLF are centrally involved in the recently formed National Movement for Peace and Democracy (NMPD)—an umbrella organisation comprising around 400 Sri Lankan NGOs, large and small. NSSP leader Karunaratna and DLF member Nimalka Fernando are part of its organisational secretariat. One of its main purposes is to provide a common platform for all groups, including the right-wing UNF, that back the peace process. At a public NMPD rally in late February, Karunaratna and DLF leader Nanayakkara appeared alongside Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, once again lending their “left” credentials to bolster his claims to be a man of peace.

A history of disasters

The NSSP has a long history of opportunist manoeuvres—all of which have had disastrous results for the working class. Its unprincipled politics can be traced to its origins in the LSSP, which in 1964 openly repudiated its Trotskyist foundations and entered the bourgeois government headed by Kumaratunga’s mother, Sirima Bandaranaike.

Those who formed the NSSP, including Karunaratna and Nanayakkara, remained inside the LSSP for more than a decade. They were in the LSSP when it joined the second Bandaranaike government in 1970, which brutally crushed an uprising of Sinhala rural youth in 1971 and imposed a communal constitution that enshrined Sinhala as the state language and Buddhism as the state religion in 1972. They only split in 1976 after Bandaranaike expelled the LSSP from the ruling coalition.

The NSSP’s departure from the LSSP had no principled basis whatsoever. From the time that it was established, the NSSP was guided by the same fundamental political orientation which gave rise to the LSSP’s betrayal. The NSSP completely accepted the framework of official Sri Lankan politics, which is mired in communalism, and confined itself to pressuring one or the other of the major bourgeois parties—the SLFP or UNP.

By 1986, the UNP government of President J.R. Jayewardene, which was responsible for instigating the civil war in 1983, faced rising class struggles along with pressure from India to halt the conflict. Jayewardene appealed to the so-called workers parties—the LSSP, the CP and the

NSSP—for assistance in finding a way of ending the fighting and suppressing the strikes and protests. All three joined the roundtable conference called in June 1986 and participated in the month-long discussions that led to the signing of the Indo Lankan Accord in July 1987. At the time, NSSP leader Karunaratna hailed the agreement as “a progressive step” and “a blow against the Western powers”.

Under the Accord, Indian troops were sent to the North and East as “peacekeepers” to supervise the disarming of the LTTE and a limited form of devolution to a new provincial council structure. In the north, the LTTE, which agreed to the Accord, rapidly came into conflict with Indian troops, leading to sustained and bloody fighting. In the south, the Accord provoked sharp differences within the political establishment and a rabidly chauvinist campaign by the JVP, which denounced “Indian imperialism” and accused the government of treason.

Faced with growing opposition in its own ranks, the UNP was compelled to accommodate. Under President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the government formed a tacit alliance with the JVP, directed above all against the working class, while at the same time providing covert support to the LTTE to create the condition where the Indian military was compelled to leave. In the south, the military worked hand-in-hand with the JVP to carry out a reign of terror against anyone who failed to support their “patriotic” campaign. In the late 1980s, the JVP’s armed gangs murdered hundreds of workers, trade unionists and political leaders in cold blood in a bid to intimidate the working class.

Having exploited the JVP to attack workers, Premadasa ruthlessly turned on his erstwhile allies, murdering the top JVP leaders and its members. He then used the JVP as the pretext for launching a vicious campaign against the rural population in the south as a whole, during which an estimated 60,000 youth were slaughtered either directly by the military or by its death squads. It should be recalled that the current prime minister, Wickremesinghe, was at the time a senior UNP parliamentary leader and minister for industries. He was widely accused of actively supporting Premadasa’s genocidal campaign.

In the early 1990s, as opposition to the resumed war and the UNP government grew, the NSSP, along with the LSSP and CP, threw their support behind Kumaratunga and her SLFP in the 1994 elections. All of these “lefts” encouraged the illusion that her promises of peace, democracy and better living standards could be trusted. At the time, the NSSP split over petty tactical differences—a faction led by Nanayakkara joined Kumaratunga’s Peoples Alliance (PA) then went on to form the DLF after being expelled. The rival NSSP group under Karunaratna preferred to maintain its distance.

Kumaratunga kept none of her promises. When talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) broke down, she adopted a strategy of “peace through war”—in other words, intensifying the fighting to either destroy the LTTE or compel it to come to the negotiating table on her terms. More people died in the conflict while the PA was in power between 1994 and 2001 than in the previous decade under UNP governments. Kumaratunga not only stepped up the war, but also implemented the IMF’s demands for economic restructuring and trampled on basic democratic rights.

As anti-government hostility increased, Karunaratna’s NSSP in 1998 formed another alliance—this time with the JVP, that is with the party that murdered NSSP members in the late 1980s. Karunaratna himself was nearly killed in a JVP bomb attack. Yet, according to the NSSP, the JVP had fundamentally changed. The NSSP promoted the JVP, which today it denounces as part of the “racists, religious sectarians and militaristic forces” as “socialist” and helped it to rebuild a trade union presence in the Colombo working class.

The NSSP-JVP coalition rapidly broke up in 2000 after the LTTE inflicted a series of devastating military defeats on the Sri Lankan army. Her military strategy in tatters, Kumaratunga made another effort to restart

peace talks, proposing constitutional changes that would permit the devolution of powers to the North and East as the basis for negotiations with the LTTE. The JVP joined the Sinhala chauvinist campaign demanding a war to the finish against the LTTE. The NSSP urged the ruling parties to support peace talks.

Kumaratunga’s plans collapsed for much the same reason that the present “peace process” is failing. While initially offering to back the PA’s constitutional changes, Wickremesinghe and the UNP came under pressure from the JVP and other Sinhala extremists who denounced the proposal as a betrayal of the Sinhala nation. In parliament, the UNP joined the JVP demagogues in loudly opposing the devolution package. Lacking the necessary two thirds majority, Kumaratunga withdrew the package.

The NSSP’s attempts to subordinate the working class to the major parties take on particularly grotesque forms today because the economic basis for its national reformist program has completely collapsed. All of the bourgeois parties to which the NSSP seeks to accommodate are committed to policies that are antithetical to the interests of the masses. The whole framework of bourgeois politics in Sri Lanka, which has revolved around parliament and the two major parties, is in the process of breaking up.

There is a division of labour among the opportunist “workers” parties, as they, each in their own way, seek to prop up the political establishment. The NSSP’s New Left Front is encouraging workers and others to support Wickremesinghe as the “lesser evil” even as his UNF is committed to making deeper inroads into the social position of the working class. At the same time, the LSSP and CP have joined the openly chauvinist campaign being waged by Kumaratunga and the JVP-SLFP alliance that threatens to plunge the country back into war.

The working class has to draw the necessary lessons from the NSSP’s opportunist manoeuvres and develop its own independent party and socialist program to fight for its class interests against all of the factions of the ruling class and their hangers-on. The only party in Sri Lanka that fights for such a socialist alternative is the Socialist Equality Party. Its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, was established in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, out of the theoretical and political struggle against the LSSP’s betrayal. The RCL/SEP opposed the racist civil war from the outset and all forms of racism and chauvinism. It has consistently fought for the political independence of the working class as the basis for taking power and establishing the Socialist United States of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the socialist transformation of society throughout the Indian subcontinent and internationally.



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