

A socialist program to end the war in Sri Lanka

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the Sri Lankan government's military offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that has already claimed the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians and driven many more from their homes. The new war serves the interests of the ruling elites in Colombo and is directed against the vast majority of the population—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike.

The working class must reject the empty claims of President Mahinda Rajapakse to be a man of peace committed to a negotiated solution to the country's protracted civil war. The military's open attacks on LTTE positions since late July are a flagrant breach of the 2002 ceasefire and the precursor to full-scale war. Nor can workers place any faith in the so-called international peace process presided over by the same powers that have backed the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Instead, the working class must initiate its own independent political campaign to rally the rural poor, young people and sections of the middle class to put a stop to war and the profit system, which is the source of militarism and communalism. At the same time, the SEP calls on working people throughout the Indian subcontinent, Asia and internationally to oppose Colombo's violent aggression and to support their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka.

It is no accident that Rajapakse ordered the latest military offensives amid a growing wave of struggles by workers and farmers in defence of jobs, working conditions and basic social benefits. The aim of the renewed civil war is to confuse and divide the masses, and to crush their growing rebelliousness. The government and the media have increasingly attacked striking workers and protesting farmers for aiding the "terrorists".

Over the past three months, the military has indiscriminately bombarded LTTE-held areas with mortars, artillery and, for the first time in the 23-year war, sustained aerial attacks. At least 1,500 soldiers, LTTE fighters and civilians have been killed so far in the fighting and more than 240,000 people have been displaced. Some 10,000 men, women and children have fled to southern India.

Half a million people are trapped in the northern Jaffna peninsula, without adequate supplies of food, medicine and other essentials. The security forces have imposed virtual martial law in the war zones of the North and East including roadblocks, curfews and arbitrary cordon and search operations.

Rajapakse's pretext for launching the offensive is completely fraudulent. He ordered a major military operation in July to capture the Mavilaru irrigation sluice gate inside LTTE territory, claiming it was strictly for humanitarian reasons—to provide water for farmers downstream. The truth is his government has shown no compassion whatsoever for the country's farmers, whose conditions are so intolerable that dozens have been driven to suicide.

The purpose of the Mavilaru operation was not to provide water, but to seize territory and provide a justification for broader attacks on the LTTE. On July 21 and again on August 5, the army blocked attempts by the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) to open the sluice gate and end the

confrontation. On both occasions, the military shelled the area, placing the lives of SLMM members at risk.

The government and the military were planning for a major offensive against the LTTE well before the Mavilaru issue arose. Since Rajapakse narrowly won the presidency last November, the army and associated paramilitaries have been conducting a clandestine war of assassination against LTTE supporters and sympathisers aimed at weakening the LTTE and goading it into retaliation. The military commanders chose the Mavilaru sluice gate because it lies in the eastern province where they calculated the LTTE had been weakened by a major split in its ranks in 2004.

At the same time, the military and its allied paramilitaries are waging a covert campaign of abduction and extra-judicial killing aimed at terrorising the Tamil population as a whole, and especially anyone opposed to the war.

The murder of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas on August 7 is a prime example. Mariyadas was shot dead at his home in the eastern rural town of Mullipothana. While the unidentified killer fled on motorbike, all the evidence indicates the army was responsible. It subsequently spread false rumours that Mariyadas was a LTTE member. To date, the police have carried out no serious investigation into the murder.

The international context

The government claims its initial offensives were "limited retaliatory attacks on LTTE targets" and that they have been continued to "neutralise LTTE threats" to military installations. In this, Colombo is following the Bush administration's line of "pre-emptive war"—on which the illegal invasion of Iraq was based, allegedly to "neutralize" the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime.

The real motivation behind Washington's aggression in Iraq and the wider Middle East is its determination to control the region's oil. The administration has ridden roughshod over international law, ushering in a new period of inter-imperialist conflict and military aggression. Having backed Washington's crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the government in Colombo has unleashed its own aggression against the island's Tamil minority, under the umbrella of the "global war on terrorism". The offensive coincided with the criminal US-backed Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which helped divert international attention from the renewal of civil war in Sri Lanka.

The Bush administration has directly encouraged Colombo. In January, US ambassador Jeffrey Lunstead bluntly warned LTTE leaders that if they refused peace talks on the government's terms, "they will face a stronger, more capable and more determined Sri Lankan military". Over the past four years, the US military has forged closer ties with its Sri Lankan

counterparts. Blaming the LTTE for the escalating conflict, the White House pressed Canada and the European Union this year to ban the LTTE as a terrorist organisation, cutting off its longstanding political and financial support from the Tamil diaspora.

All the major and regional powers have fallen into line with Washington. The EU, Japan and Norway, which along with the US form the so-called co-chairs of the international peace process, have ignored the Sri Lankan military's open breaches of the 2002 ceasefire and instead praised Rajapakse for his "restraint". International criticism has been restricted to mild rebukes of Colombo for the worst atrocities—the cold-blooded murder of 17 aid workers in Muttur on August 4 and an air attack on a school compound in the Mullaitivu district on August 14 that killed scores of young female students.

Moreover, there has not been a murmur of international disapproval over Rajapakse's close relations with the Sinhala extremists of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), who have more and more openly agitated for war. It was government support for the JVP's demand for a major revision of the 2002 ceasefire in favour of the army, that ensured the failure of peace talks in February.

For its part, the Indian government has stood by silently despite mounting public anger, particularly in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. To placate its Tamil Nadu coalition partners, the Congress-led government in New Delhi has not finalised a long-awaited defence agreement with Colombo that would significantly enhance the Sri Lankan military's capabilities. At the same time India, which has forged a "strategic partnership" with the US, is following Washington's lead in backing the Rajapakse government and isolating the LTTE.

The lessons of the "peace process"

Contrary to the illusions peddled by various Sri Lankan "lefts", the alternative to war in Sri Lanka is not a return to the failed "peace process". It is essential to draw a political balance sheet of what has occurred since the signing of a formal ceasefire in February 2002. The internationally sponsored peace talks were never aimed at meeting the needs and aspirations of ordinary working people for peace, democratic rights and decent living standards. The US and other major powers backed the peace process as a means for ending a war that threatened their growing economic and strategic interests in South Asia. For the Sri Lankan ruling class, it was the means for establishing a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites to intensify their mutual economic exploitation of the working class.

The ceasefire emerged from an acute political and economic crisis. In April and May 2000, the Sri Lankan military suffered a series of devastating defeats at the hands of the LTTE, including the unprecedented loss of its key strategic base at Elephant Pass. The cumulative economic impact of two decades of war was revealed in the first-ever negative growth rate for the year 2001. For the most powerful sections of the corporate elite, the costs and destruction caused by the war had become an intolerable liability that cut Sri Lanka off from global investment flows and condemned the country to economic backwardness.

The crucial turning point, however, was not a Sri Lankan event, but the September 11 attacks on the US. The Sri Lankan ruling elites immediately recognised that the Bush administration's "war on terror" presented an extraordinary opportunity to force the LTTE to the negotiating table on terms favourable to Colombo. If it failed to comply, the LTTE faced the prospect of becoming one of Washington's targets. When President Chandrika Kumaratunga refused to move quickly enough, her SLFP-led government was brought down, in time-honoured Sri Lankan fashion,

through the bribing of a handful of MPs to cross the parliamentary floor. The United National Party (UNP) and its allies won the general election in December 2001 and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe promptly signed a ceasefire agreement with LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The overriding concern of the UNP was not peace as such. The party had been responsible for starting the war in 1983 and ruthlessly prosecuting it for a decade. For Wickremesinghe, peace negotiations were part of a grand "Regaining Sri Lanka" plan to transform the island into a regional investment hub—the Hong Kong of South Asia. Proposals for a powersharing arrangement with the LTTE were accompanied by a dramatic acceleration of market reforms to dismantle the welfare state, privatise state enterprises, revitalise the island's infrastructure and offer huge incentives to business and foreign investors.

The LTTE leadership signed on enthusiastically as a junior partner. At the first round of talks in September 2002, chief negotiator Anton Balasingham formally dropped the LTTE's longstanding demand for a separate state of Tamil Eelam and promised to cooperate with the government in creating a "tiger economy". The LTTE's stance conclusively demonstrated that it stood, not for the needs and aspirations of the vast majority of Tamils, but for the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie. The LTTE was seeking a subordinate role, within a federated state, in policing the Tamil masses in the North and East of the island.

The ceasefire, however, cut across deeply-entrenched anti-Tamil chauvinism within the Colombo political establishment and infuriated sections of the military that had made their careers and, in some cases, personal fortunes, from the war. Communalism has been a key weapon of Sri Lanka's ruling elite from the time of formal independence in 1948, when the new rulers in Colombo relied on communal politics to divide an insurgent working class movement. One of the first actions of the UNP when it assumed office was to strip one million Tamil-speaking plantation workers of their citizenship rights. In every major political crisis since then, governments in Colombo, whether headed by the UNP or SLFP, have resorted to anti-Tamil bigotry and violence to maintain their rule—a process that culminated in civil war in 1983.

Even though the SLFP lost the 2001 general election, Kumaratunga remained as the country's president and became the focus of efforts to sabotage the ceasefire. In 2003, the navy provocatively attacked and sank LTTE vessels on the eve of negotiations. The LTTE had made major concessions by signing on to the peace process, but had received nothing in return. As a consequence, it faced growing popular opposition in the North and East. The Bush administration rubbed salt into the wound by blocking LTTE representatives from attending a key international aid conference in Washington on the grounds that they were members of a "terrorist organisation". Later that month, the LTTE pulled out of negotiations.

Wickremesinghe did not condemn the military provocations nor did he mount a political campaign against the increasingly strident denunciations of the government and the ceasefire being made by Kumaratunga, the SLFP and the JVP. Mired in Sinhala chauvinism like its opponents, the UNP was acutely sensitive to the charge that it was betraying the country to the LTTE. Throughout the lengthy peace process, the only proposal for a political solution to the war came from the LTTE in November 2003, with its plan for an Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) as the means for restarting talks.

The JVP immediately denounced the proposal as a betrayal and urged Kumaratunga to seize power. Just a week later, the president used her extraordinary executive powers to launch what amounted to a constitutional coup. In the name of defending national security, she took over three key ministries, including defence, and prepared to impose a state of emergency. Under pressure from Washington and New Delhi, Kumaratunga pulled back from assuming full power. In February 2004, however, she summarily sacked the Wickremesinghe government and

formed an electoral alliance with the JVP to contest new elections in April 2004.

The road to war

The UNP lost the elections not because the majority of voters wanted war, but because of mounting hostility to its economic restructuring program. The JVP, which campaigned on the basis of empty populist pledges and nationalist slogans, was able to make significant gains due to widespread alienation from both major parties. For the first time since the JVP's formation as a Maoist guerrilla outfit in the 1960s, its leaders joined a national government.

The new coalition government confronted the same basic dilemma as its predecessor. Politically, it was dependent on whipping up communalism to confuse and divide the population. Economically, it needed to maintain the ceasefire to ensure an inflow of foreign investment. International donors had pledged \$US4.5 billion in aid, but this was tied to the resumption of the peace talks. The coalition government was effectively paralysed. Kumaratunga promised to restart peace talks, but took no steps in that direction, fearful of alienating her JVP allies.

In December 2004, Kumaratunga's political problems were compounded by the tsunami that devastated much of coastal Sri Lanka, killing more than 30,000 people and leaving a quarter of a million homeless. Despite decades of communal politics, ordinary working people came to the aid of the stricken victims, regardless of their ethnicity, religion or language. A widespread sentiment of basic class solidarity and distrust of the government developed: everyone felt they were in the same boat and had to help each other out.

Far from welcoming the voluntary aid initiatives, Kumaratunga reacted by imposing a state of emergency and placing all relief efforts under the military. Under considerable international pressure, she proposed a joint mechanism with the LTTE to provide assistance to the tsunami victims. Even this limited temporary measure was denounced by the JVP for providing official recognition to the LTTE. When Kumaratunga agreed to the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) in June 2005, the JVP leaders quit the government and launched nationwide protests against the deal. To their dismay, the campaign was a dismal failure. Many people who had supported the JVP as a protest against the major parties were alienated by a year of broken promises and the party's communal denunciations of the P-TOMS agreement.

In August 2005, amid this tense situation, foreign minister Luxman Kadirgamar was assassinated, providing an immediate boost to opponents of the peace process. From being on the defensive, the JVP and JHU immediately launched a campaign blaming the LTTE for the killing and denouncing anyone who suggested otherwise. More than a year after the murder, there is no conclusive evidence that the LTTE was responsible. In fact, it is just as likely that the political beneficiaries of the crime were the ones who carried it out. The JVP, JHU and sections of the military all had means and motive as well as a long history of political violence.

Kadirgamar's assassination marked a turning point. Amid the clamour in Colombo for revenge, P-TOMS rapidly became a dead letter. The Supreme Court quickly ruled against Kumaratunga's attempts to remain in office for an additional year and presidential elections were called for November. Rajapakse secured the SLFP nomination and signed electoral pacts with the JVP and JHU based on a more aggressive stance against the LTTE. He won the vote by the narrowest of margins by capitalising on voters' ongoing hostility to Wickremesinghe's record of economic austerity.

An independent program for the working class

It is crucial that workers draw the necessary political lessons. The abject failure of the "peace process" of the past four years is a direct product of the communal politics exploited by the country's ruling elites since independence. It is precisely these politics that have led to 20-year civil war, costing the lives of 65,000 people and a society poisoned by ethnic, language and religious prejudices.

The ruling class has created a political monster that now threatens its own economic interests. Efforts to end the war and integrate Sri Lanka more closely into global capitalism have run up against the entrenched interests of a state founded on Sinhala supremacism. The military top brass, the Buddhist hierarchy, the state bureaucracy and layers of business have all profited from the war. Moreover, the "peace process" is organically tied to a program of market reforms that is producing deepening social polarisation and discontent. Incapable of addressing the social needs of working people, the Colombo ruling elites have once again resorted to inflaming communal tensions and reigniting civil war.

The entire political establishment has rallied around Rajapakse's aggression. The treacherous old parties of the working class—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party—are part of the government! Various middle class radical organizations, like the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), claim to oppose the war, but are completely wedded to the framework of official politics. It is no surprise that they still adhere to the failed "peace process" or that they share the platform at their protests with right-wing UNP politicians.

The working class must make a fundamental break with all these parties. To oppose the war and fight for its own social interests, the working class has to build an independent political movement based on the principles of socialist internationalism. The war cannot be ended by pressuring the Rajapakse government to change its direction, or by swapping it for a UNP-led coalition. The profit system that generates communalism and conflict must be abolished.

This means that the working class must fight for political power in its own right and, in so doing, rally the support of the urban poor and the rural masses for the formation of a workers' and farmers' government. To conduct such a struggle requires a political program that meets the social needs and democratic aspirations of ordinary working people—that is, the vast majority of the population.

The essential basis for unifying the working class is intransigent opposition to all forms of nationalism, communalism and racism, including both the Sinhala supremacism of the Colombo politicians and the Tamil separatism of the LTTE. While recognising that the Rajapakse government bears full responsibility for the present war, the SEP opposes all racist outrages whether conducted by the security forces and their allied Tamil paramilitaries, or by the LTTE. The slaughter of innocent civilians is designed to stoke up communal hostilities and deliberately set working people against each other.

As the first step towards ending the war, the Socialist Equality Party demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan security forces from the war zones of the North and East. The tens of thousands of soldiers and police in these areas function as an army of occupation that is despised and hated by the Tamil population for its systematic persecution, arbitrary arrests, torture and killings. The call for an end to this oppression will serve as a powerful pole of attraction for all those throughout the island who want to establish peace and defend basic democratic rights.

To resolve all outstanding democratic issues, the SEP calls for a genuine, democratically-elected constituent assembly to draw up a new constitution for the ending of all forms of discrimination based on language, religion, caste and sex and to guarantee democratic rights for

all. The SEP's policy has nothing in common with the bogus parliamentary exercises carried out in 1972 and 1978 to impose anti-democratic constitutions on the Sri Lankan people. The SEP demands the annulment of all repressive laws including the Public Security Act and the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Genuine democracy means more than the formal equality of the bourgeois legal system and parliamentary elections, which always favour the rich and privileged. The economic foundation of society must be transformed to serve the interests of the broad masses of working people. That is why the SEP advocates a socialist program to place all the major financial, industrial and trading enterprises under democratic, public ownership and control, to meet the needs of the vast majority of society, not the profits of the wealthy few.

Socialism cannot be achieved on a single, small island in South Asia, nor, indeed, in any isolated nation, large or small. The struggle for socialism is necessarily international. The only alternative to the predatory activities of global capitalism is a unified international counteroffensive by the working class to refashion society along socialist lines. The struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam is a component of the wider struggle for the United Socialist States of South Asia. This is the program fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) through the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The SEP, founded as the Revolutionary Communist League in 1968, is the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, which has consistently championed the democratic and social rights of the working class and oppressed people. We call on all those who aspire to peace and oppose the assault on democratic and social rights to read the WSWs and to join and build the SEP.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact