

Report to the ISSE conference: on the political situation in Sri Lanka and the disappearance of SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran

19 April 2007

The following is a report to ISSE/SEP Emergency Conference Against War by Parwini Zora motivating the resolution adopted by the conference on the disappearance of SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan, and demanding an investigation into the murder of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas.

The conference was held March 31-April 1 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Further reports and international greetings will be published in the coming days.

Comrades, I would like to motivate a resolution concerning the disappearance of SEP party member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend Sivanathan Mathivathanan in the northern Jaffna island of Kys on March 22, or barely two weeks ago.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its Sri Lankan section, the Socialist Equality Party, charge the present Sri Lankan government and its military with responsibility in these disappearances.

As part of the SEP/WSWS campaign to demand the government and the military provide an accounting for these kidnappings, a press conference was held on the 30th of March in Colombo, for which there was a considerable response from the official media, both electronic and print.

Hundreds of people have been abducted, “disappeared” or killed in the hands of the military and associated paramilitaries in the North and East, and this number has been increasing over the previous year. This includes the murder of SEP supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas August 7th. The level of media coverage at the press conference reflected the growing concern among ordinary people over the increasing abductions amidst the Sri Lankan government’s escalation of the war, in breach of its official cease-fire agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

These brazen methods of state repression should be understood as part of intensified preparations for terrorizing working people, and as a move to further curtail basic democratic rights. In particular, the government is attempting to suppress political opposition to its unpopular economic and social policies, above all the opposition to the war itself.

Following a series of strikes and protests by workers over jobs, wages and conditions, a draconian security law, The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), was reintroduced last December. The government has prominently accused striking workers on the docks and during the recent plantation strikes of aiding “terrorism.” Thus in the name of “national security”, the military and police have been given sweeping powers to arrest and detain individuals, including journalists.

Given the critical situation that faces the country, and particularly given the brutal traditions of previous Sri Lankan bourgeois governments, the working class in Sri Lanka must take the current developments as a clear warning. It is necessary to make a decisive break from all parties of the

political establishment, petty-bourgeois nationalists and left radical organizations. All of these tendencies have been exposed for their utter inability to provide a political answer to the mounting socio-economic crisis in the country, which has resulted in acute levels of social polarization and poverty, exasperated by decades of communal war.

As comrades can read detailed analyses of the recent developments in Sri Lanka on the WSWS, I want to particularly stress in this report the importance of advancing a politically independent working class program based on an uncompromising perspective of socialist internationalism. And in doing so I want to briefly review critical lessons from the historical experience of the Sri Lankan working class.

In both India and Sri Lanka, the national bourgeoisie ultimately suppressed the anti-imperialist movement and made a deal with British imperialism, under which they assumed control of the colonial state apparatus. But whereas in India, the aspirant national bourgeoisie, through the Indian National Congress, did for a time mount controlled mass agitations against the British, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie effectively had independence thrust upon it under the 1948 Soulbury constitution.

And in that constitution, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie made communalism a founding principle, by stripping the Tamil-speaking plantation workers, who constituted about one-eighth of the island’s population, of citizenship rights on the grounds that they were migrant workers.

This anti-democratic move perpetuated the “divide and rule” policies of the British and was chiefly a response to the growing influence of the Trotskyists among the plantation workers, the island working class as a whole, and the Indian subcontinent.

In Sri Lanka, the anti-imperialist movement in the island had been spearheaded by the Trotskyist Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), producing an explosive political contradiction—a reactionary, colonial bourgeoisie faced with a growing and highly politically-advanced working-class movement.

The BLPI led the opposition within and without the Ceylonese parliament to the attack on the Tamil plantation workers and connected it to a far-sighted analysis as to the nature of the states created in South Asia in 1947-48 by “decolonization” and communal partition—Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and a Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India. The emergence of these states, explained the BLPI, did not constitute genuine independence but rather was “a refashioning” of the imperialist order.

The subsequent adaptation of the BLPI to the postwar, Stalinist-assisted restabilization of capitalism and its specific South Asia expression (the emergence of independent capitalist states under the rule of local bourgeoisies)—an adaptation encouraged by Michael Pablo and Ernest Mandel, the leaders of a revisionist tendency within the Fourth International—had tragic consequences for the South Asian working class.

Founded in 1942 on an all-India perspective to unify workers across the subcontinent, the BLPI was liquidated into the Congress Socialist Party in India in 1948-49. Soon after, its Ceylonese unit entered into a politically unclarified reunification with the centrist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which, while claiming to be Trotskyist, had refused to join BLPI at its foundation on nationalist and factional grounds. The new, fused organization took the name LSSP.

In the subsequent decades, the LSSP underwent a process of centrist backsliding, increasingly focusing its work on trade union and parliamentary activity and retreating from socialist internationalism. This took two forms. While criticizing the theories of Mandel and Pablo concerning the purported revolutionary potential of Stalinism, the LSSP took a dismissive attitude to the political-theoretical struggle within the Fourth International and opposed the creation of the International Committee of the Fourth International and its struggle against Pablo's repudiation of a world revolutionary strategy in favor of tactical opportunism. In the name of getting closer to the masses, the LSSP adapted to, rather than fought against, the Sinhala Buddhist chauvinism promoted by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

In 1953, the LSSP's stature among the working class and toilers had been greatly increased by its successful prosecution of an island-wide general strike (the "hartal" of 1953). But when the LSSP found itself at the head of a wave of militant working class struggles in the early 1960s, its leadership did not give articulation to the revolutionary strivings of the masses, but rather responded to overtures from the populist, Sinhala chauvinist SLFP, and in 1964, along with the Stalinist Communist Party of Ceylon, joined a bourgeois coalition government headed by Mme. Sirima Bandaranaike.

As ministers in a subsequent bourgeois coalition government, the LSSP leaders played a major role in the drawing up of the undemocratic 1972 constitution, which renamed Ceylon as Sri Lanka and abrogated the limited constitutional protections, included in the Soulbury constitution, against breaches of minority rights. The new constitution prominently enshrined Buddhism as the "foremost religion" and the anti-Tamil "Sinhala only" legislation of 1956, which made the language spoken by a majority the sole official language, was constitutionally entrenched.

Though changes in the world economic situation following the economic downturn in the 1970's lie at the root of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie's decision to resort to communal warfare as a means to divert political opposition of the working class against its unpopular policies, the LSSP's betrayal sowed its seeds.

By capitulating to Sinhala nationalism and abandoning the struggle to defend the interests of all sections of the Sri Lankan working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—the LSSP opened the door for petty-bourgeois radical organizations to win an audience for their communal politics. In the south, this took form of the rise of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which appealed to rural Sinhala youth on the basis of Sinhala chauvinism, mixed with Maoism and Guevarism. In the north, the LTTE called on disaffected Tamil youth to fight for Tamil separatism—in the form of a separate state-let of Eelam.

In 1983, the then ruling United National Party (UNP) launched the worst anti-Tamil pogrom ever, which provided the immediate impetus for the eruption of the civil war. The pogrom was intended chiefly as a means of deflecting attention away from the social disaster caused by the policies of "structural reform" it had pursued since 1977, at the urging of the IMF and World Bank.

The war has been an unmitigated disaster for the people of Sri Lanka, in the south no less than predominantly Tamil north and east, and has been used as the justification for a never-ending series of right-wing socio-economic policies and attacks on democratic rights.

The US long showed a callous indifference to the bloodletting in South Asia. If it and other major powers promoted the official cease fire

agreement or the so-called "peace process" initiated in 2002, it was because Washington came to see the military conflict on the island as cutting across the US's growing economic and strategic interests in South Asia. Sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite, meanwhile, had come round to favoring a power-sharing arrangement between the Sinhala and Tamil elites so they could press forward with their plans to make the island a magnet for international capital seeking cheap-labor.

The ceasefire agreement itself emerged chiefly in response to 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. 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 rather September 11, 2001. The Sri Lankan ruling elites immediately recognized that the Bush administration's "war on terror" presented an extraordinary opportunity to force the LTTE to the negotiating table on terms favorable to Colombo. The Colombo administration is following the Bush administration's line of "pre-emptive" war in its provocations against the LTTE.

The current Rajapakse SLFP-led government, faced with mounting popular opposition to the war and the deterioration of living standards, has allowed the military to wage a dirty covert war against the LTTE since last July, plunging the country into renewed civil war in all but name.

The SEP and the ISSE oppose both the resumption of all-out war and the various power sharing schemes that have been proposed as part of a "peace" deal. These would further entrench communalist divisions, and they all involve the imposition of an unelected, communally-based interim administration in the North and East that will collaborate with Colombo in implementing the dictates of global capital.

The essential basis for the unification of 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. A just end to the civil war, which is itself a glaring expression of the country's uncompleted democratic-revolutionary tasks, can be achieved only as part of a broader struggle for socialism.

I want to stress finally that the deepening economic, social and political crisis in Sri Lanka should be understood neither as a temporary nor a localized phenomenon but as the product of the irresolvable contradictions wracking the profit system itself, above all between the increasingly globalised character of productive processes and the bankrupt nation state system in which capitalism remains rooted.

None of the problems confronting workers can be resolved within the borders of the tiny island in South Asia, nor in any isolated nation, large or small. The struggle for socialism is necessarily international. Thus the central task is the assimilation of the lessons of the strategic experiences of the international working class throughout the twentieth century, on which the ISSE should be built.

Comrades, on this basis, I ask you to for your support in endorsing the following resolution calling on the Sri Lankan government to provide the whereabouts and ensure the safe return of our comrade Nadarajah Wimalaswaran and his friend Sivananthan Mathivathanan, and demand a speedy inquiry into the murder of our supporter Sivapragasam Mariyadas.



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