

Sri Lankan independence: 60 years of communalism, social decay and war

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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February 4, 2008 marks 60 years since Sri Lanka's formal independence from Britain. The very character of today's official celebrations—a military parade under conditions of a security lockdown in Colombo and a civil war raging in the north—is testimony to the complete political bankruptcy of the Sri Lankan ruling elites. Six decades of independence have brought ordinary working people nothing but communal conflict, deepening social misery and increasingly anti-democratic methods of rule.

For nearly half of the past 60 years, the island has been mired in a war aimed at maintaining the dominance of the Sinhala Buddhist elites over the Tamil minority. More than 70,000 people have died in the fighting, millions have been displaced within the island or overseas and large areas of the country have been devastated as economic resources have been squandered on the fratricidal conflict. Any attempt to establish a peace deal has been dashed by the communal politics used by the ruling class since independence to divide and dominate the working class.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, who will preside over events today, has nothing to offer but nationalist bombast. A month ago his government formally tore up the 2002 ceasefire and declared a war to the finish against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Even if he were to achieve his immediate military objective, Rajapakse has no solution to the communal tensions created by decades of anti-Tamil discrimination.

In 2006, Rajapakse plunged the country back to war in response to a deepening economic crisis and rising social discontent. Like his predecessors, the president has used the war to stir up ethnic hatreds and justify the imposition of draconian emergency powers to suppress opposition. Striking workers, protesting farmers and media critics have all been branded as “Tiger” sympathisers or terrorists. Shadowy death squads operating in collaboration with the military have killed or “disappeared” hundreds of people.

Conditions of life for the majority of the population have become intolerable. Huge increases in military spending, along with soaring oil prices, have created runaway inflation, now at 26 percent, putting basic commodities beyond the reach of ordinary people. The hardships are being compounded by increased taxes and the axing of public sector jobs and services. A looming slowdown in the US and globally will only compound the island's economic problems, setting the stage for a social and political explosion.

The record of the past 60 years constitutes an indictment of the Sri Lankan ruling class, whose political representatives can offer no way out of the disaster they have created. The history of Sri Lanka has tragically confirmed a fundamental truth of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: the organic incapacity of the bourgeoisie in countries of belated capitalist development to resolve any of the outstanding democratic and social tasks. The only future being offered by the government in Colombo is war, repression and ever-widening social inequality.

Sri Lanka is just one of the sharpest examples of the failure of the

various post-colonial schemes in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the immediate region, India and Pakistan—the products of the reactionary 1947 partition of the subcontinent—have already fought three wars. The venal Indian politicians, who boast about the “economic miracle” in “the world's largest democracy”, sit on a ticking social time bomb with 400 million people living in poverty. They have no hesitation in employing police state methods to suppress opposition. The current military-based regimes in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma only highlight the fact that the local ruling elites have found no other means to contain the explosive social, political and economic contradictions in their countries.

The working class is the only social force capable of resolving the present impasse in Sri Lanka and throughout the region on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. But the building of a socialist movement is only possible on the basis of drawing a historical balance sheet of the past 60 years. This is certainly the case in Sri Lanka where the Trotskyists of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), later the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), commanded the allegiance of the most class conscious layers of workers. The political lessons of the degeneration of the LSSP hold immense significance, not only for the working class in Sri Lanka, but throughout Asia and internationally. It was the LSSP's betrayal of Trotskyist principles, when its leaders joined the bourgeois government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964, that allowed the communal politics of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to predominate and ultimately led to the eruption of civil war in 1983.

Sixty years ago, the BLPI organised a demonstration on Galle Face Green in Colombo that was very different to the shameless display of militarism being presented by the Rajapakse government today on the same spot. The Trotskyists rejected the sham independence that had been arranged behind closed doors in the British Colonial Office in London. On February 4 1948, the BLPI mobilised 50,000 workers—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—to express their determination to continue the struggle for socialism and genuine independence through the formation of a workers' and peasants' government.

Based on a deep understanding of Trotsky's Permanent Revolution, BLPI leader Colvin R de Silva made a far-sighted analysis of the British handover in Sri Lanka that was broadly applicable to all of the post-colonial regimes of the post-war period. In a statement entitled “Independence Real or Fake”, de Silva explained: “[T]he essence of this change lies not in any passage of Ceylon [Sri Lanka] from colonial status to the status of independence, but in the change-over of British imperialism in Ceylon from methods of direct rule to methods of indirect rule... The native exploiting classes of Ceylon have been handed over, well nigh completely, the task of administering British imperialism's interests in Ceylon. British imperialism has retired into the background, although it has not in any sense abdicated.”

Sri Lanka's first prime minister D.S. Senanayake was well aware of the dangers posed by the BLPI's opposition to independence. He wrote to the BLPI, begging its leaders to attend the official handover ceremony. The

BLPI's political prestige stemmed from its refusal to end the anti-colonial struggle during World War II and subordinate the interests of the working class to the British war effort. Unlike the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL), the BLPI rejected the claim that the war was a struggle of "democracy" against fascism, insisting that the two rival gangs of imperialist powers were vying for world domination.

In 1945, the BLPI emerged as the predominant influence in the Sri Lankan working class, despite being banned and its leaders jailed during the war. It led general strikes in 1946 and 1947, and in the 1947 elections, the Trotskyists, while falling short of a parliamentary majority, forced Senanayake's United National Party (UNP) to form a coalition with various minor parties. Confronted with an insurgent working class, the UNP resorted, from the outset, to divisive communal politics.

One of the first acts of the Senanayake government in 1948 was to disenfranchise more than a million Tamil-speaking plantation workers who had been brought from southern India to work in the island's tea and rubber estates over the previous century. In a single blow, 10 percent of the island's population was stripped of its citizenship rights. The BLPI opposed the racist measure and warned that discrimination would inevitably be extended to the Tamils of the north and east, despite their centuries-long history on the island.

The year 1953 marked a crucial turning point. In August, a one-day hartal or general shutdown called by the LSSP (the BLPI and LSSP amalgamated in 1950) erupted into a mass uprising that shook capitalist rule to its core. Protests over rising prices and welfare cutbacks continued for three days, generating widespread support among all communities—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—and spreading into rural areas. The UNP cabinet, which met in a crisis session on board a British warship in Colombo harbour, was compelled to reverse most of its economic measures.

The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie drew definite lessons from this unnerving experience. In the immediate aftermath of the hartal, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, who had broken from the UNP in 1951 and formed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), advanced an openly Sinhala supremacist program, demanding Sinhala become the island's sole official language, to the exclusion of Tamil. Bandaranaike had concluded that the stirring up of anti-Tamil prejudice was the only means of countering the LSSP's influence. He dressed up his "Sinhala only" racialism with empty socialistic phrase mongering about "nationalisation" and pro-poor policies.

1953 was also a decisive year in the international Trotskyist movement. In November, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was founded in opposition to an opportunist current led by Ernest Mandel and Michel Pablo. Deeply sceptical about the prospects for socialism following the post-war restabilisation of capitalism, they rejected the basic lessons of the Russian Revolution. The parties of the Fourth International, Pablo and Mandel insisted, would not be able to repeat the experience of the Bolsheviks and come to the head of a revolutionary movement through the struggle for the political independence of the working class. Instead, they declared, Trotskyists had to integrate themselves into the "real mass movements"—in reality, subordinate their parties to the existing Stalinist, Social Democratic and bourgeois nationalist leaderships.

The LSSP's stance on the split was to have profound consequences for the working class in Sri Lanka. Having waged a struggle against the CPSL, the LSSP leaders were critical of the pro-Stalinist orientation of Pablo and Mandel. But they refused to join the ICFI and eventually sided with the Pabloite International Secretariat, which obligingly provided its blessings for the LSSP's subsequent political backsliding. Orienting to the "real mass movement" had a definite meaning in Sri Lanka. Rather than waging a relentless political struggle against the pseudo-socialism of Bandaranaike, the LSSP leaders adapted to his communal politics.

Parliamentary cretinism increasingly replaced the defence of the principles of socialist internationalism.

The LSSP's capitulation did not take place all at once. In the 1956 election that brought Bandaranaike to power, the LSSP opposed his "Sinhala only" policy and called for the parity of Sinhala and Tamil as state languages. The party defended Tamils from the increasingly vicious pogroms unleashed by Sinhala gangs. The LSSP's slogan—"One language, two countries; two languages, one country"—was remarkably prescient in its prediction of the violent consequences of anti-Tamil discrimination. At the same time, however, the LSSP's preoccupation with parliamentary manoeuvres and its growing adaptation to Bandaranaike were also evident in its no-contest electoral pacts with the SLFP which began as early as 1956.

A decade of political degeneration, aided and abetted by the Pabloite United Secretariat, culminated in the entry of the LSSP into the SLFP coalition government of Bandaranaike's widow in 1964. The price for their ministerial seats was to call off the explosive "21 demands" movement of workers that was threatening to become a repeat of the 1953 hartal. While the new government collapsed within months, the extent of the LSSP's betrayal was already apparent in its support for the Sirima-Shastri accord between Colombo and New Delhi to deport some 300,000 plantation workers to southern India. This amounted to a complete repudiation of the Trotskyist movement's defence of the citizenship rights of Tamil workers in 1948.

The SLFP-LSSP coalition was only fully consummated after it won the 1970 election. Faced with growing economic instability, the new government quickly tore up its election promises and began implementing the austerity measures demanded by the IMF. The LSSP's participation in the openly capitalist government created great confusion in the working class. Sections of radicalised youth turned to outfits such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or National Liberation Front, with its toxic ideological mix of Maoism, Guevarrism and Sinhala chauvinism. One of the first actions of the Bandaranaike government was to savagely suppress the JVP's initial adventure into guerrillaism—an armed uprising of rural Sinhala youth in 1971. More than 10,000 people were killed and another 15,000 detained in prison camps set up around the island.

In response to the JVP's challenge, the government veered even more sharply towards Sinhala communalism, with the LSSP at the forefront. In 1972, Colvin R de Silva was responsible for drafting a constitution for the newly named Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. The constitution was neither socialist nor democratic. Under the pretext of ending the vestiges of British colonial rule, de Silva incorporated anti-Tamil discrimination into the constitution by enshrining Buddhism as the state religion, alongside Sinhala as the sole official language.

As minister for plantations, de Silva also presided over the "nationalisation" of large tea plantations which were placed in the hands of Sinhala managers. Thousands of Tamil estate workers were forcibly deported under the terms of the Sirima-Shastri accord, as land was handed over to Sinhala farmers. The economic hardship of the period was felt with particular harshness in the plantation areas, where workers targeted for deportation were deprived of any livelihood. Dozens starved to death.

The Bandaranaike government "standardised" university entrance exams—a measure designed to give Sinhala students priority over their Tamil counterparts. The decision outraged many Tamil youth, who began to conclude that they had no future within the Sri Lankan state and turned to the Tamil separatism of the LTTE and other armed groups to fight for their rights.

The country's finance minister—LSSP leader N.M. Perera—responded to the deepening economic crisis by imposing rationing. Absurdly claiming to be implementing socialism, he placed a ban on eating rice on Tuesdays and Fridays. Even the transportation of small quantities of rice was treated as a criminal act. This attempt to regulate the island's capitalist economy

and shield it from the impact of global economic storms inevitably floundered, creating widespread bitterness. The accumulated anger of workers exploded in a general strike in 1976 that marked the end of the coalition. In the 1977 elections, the UNP won a landslide five-sixths parliamentary majority and immediately launched an ambitious project of free market reform and opening up the economy to foreign capital.

Far from solving the country's political crisis, the unleashing of market forces deepened the social divide and produced seething discontent. Like his predecessors, UNP leader J.R. Jayawardene reacted by whipping up communal divisions and employing anti-democratic methods. In 1980, the government responded to a general strike against privatisation and job losses by summarily sacking more than 100,000 workers. At the same time, UNP-inspired gangs of Sinhala thugs seized on isolated attacks by Tamil separatists to perpetrate communal outrages. In 1981, the Jaffna library was burnt to the ground, destroying its irreplaceable collection of Tamil manuscripts and books. In July 1983 a horrific island-wide pogrom against Tamils was carried out, in which hundreds were killed and thousands of homes and businesses destroyed. Civil war was the result.

For a quarter of a century, the Sri Lankan ruling class has proven completely incapable of ending the war, despite the fact that the conflict has had a devastating impact on its own economic interests. Every attempt to broker a peace deal has collapsed amid vitriolic recriminations within the political establishment over any concessions to the Tamil minority. Having exploited the weapon of communal politics for 60 years to divide the working class, the political representatives of the bourgeoisie are organically incapable of extending the most elementary democratic rights to all of the country's citizens.

The most recent effort to end the war followed a series of military defeats for the government in 2000 amid a deep economic crisis. In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the US in 2001, sections of the Sri Lankan corporate elite concluded that the time was opportune to force the "terrorist" LTTE to the negotiating table. When the SLFP-led ruling coalition resisted, fresh elections were engineered and a UNP government installed, which called for a peace deal with the LTTE as part of broad plans to integrate the island into the globalised economy and capitalise on the developing boom in India.

Right from the outset, however, the 2002 ceasefire came under attack from the SLFP and Sinhala extremist groups such as the JVP, as well as from sections of the military brass and state bureaucracy. Six decades of communalism and 25 years of war have generated powerful vested interests that regard any compromise as treason. The entire Colombo establishment is acutely sensitive to any suggestion that it is betraying the Sinhala Buddhist nation. The election of Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election on a program calculated to provoke the LTTE marked the effective end of the ceasefire.

The JVP's evolution is a sharp expression of the political bankruptcy of the various middle class radical movements that emerged after the LSSP's betrayal. It has now all but jettisoned its previous socialist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, integrated itself into the political establishment and become the most ardent supporter of the war. As for the LTTE, its Tamil separatism never represented the interests of the Tamil masses, but rather those of the Tamil bourgeoisie. Its perspective in the peace talks of 2002-03 was for a powersharing arrangement that would enable the Sinhala and Tamil elites to jointly exploit the working class. With the collapse of negotiations, the LTTE has been reduced to making impotent appeals to the major powers to call the Colombo government into line.

Just as the BLPI did in 1948, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on the Sri Lankan working class to reject today's official celebrations of nationalism and militarism. Sixty years ago, the Trotskyists threw down their challenge declaring: "Will there be anything for the masses of this country to hail in it [independence] at all?... The answer of the BLPI to the above question is a clear and unequivocal "No!". There is nothing for the

masses to enthuse over in this 'new status'." What the BLPI wrote then has been vindicated many times over.

We insist that the working class alone is capable of ending the war and providing a path out of the present disaster. Workers have suffered one catastrophe after another at the hands of those who would tie their fate to one or other section of the ruling class. The SEP also rejects those who call for working people to put their trust in the "international community". All the major powers, the US in particular, have accepted the collapse of the 2002 ceasefire and the much vaunted "peace process" without so much as a whimper. Their concerns were never for the Sri Lankan people, but rather to advance their own economic and strategic interests throughout the region.

The lessons of the past sixty years make clear that the struggle against the war must be based on the rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism—whether Sinhala supremacism or Tamil separatism. The working class must champion the democratic rights of all working people regardless of their language, religion or ethnic background. The first step is to demand an immediate and unconditional end to the military occupation of the north and east. To those who howl that this will hand victory to the LTTE, we declare that this demand is essential for unifying the Sinhala and Tamil masses in a joint struggle against the oppressive rule of both the Colombo government and the LTTE.

The SEP fights for a workers' and farmers' government and the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam. We call for the convening of a genuine constituent assembly to abolish decades of discrimination and oppression on the basis of religion, ethnicity, caste and gender. Democratic rights can only be assured by ending social inequality. The SEP insists that society has to be restructured from top to bottom along socialist lines, so that the wealth produced by the working class is used to meet the pressing social needs of all, not the profits of the wealthy few.

From its inception, the BLPI rejected the Stalinist program of "socialism in one country" and set out to build an all-India movement as part of the international struggle for socialism. Today the international economy, and with it the international working class, is globally integrated to an unprecedented degree, rendering completely outmoded all programs of national economic regulation. The fight for socialism on this small island will only advance as part of a broader movement of the working class across South Asia and internationally. The allies of the Sri Lankan workers are not to be found in the political establishment in Colombo but among their class brothers and sisters throughout the region and around the world. The SEP fights for a federation of socialist republics of South Asia as the means of advancing the unity of the working class throughout the region and internationally.

The SEP's forerunner was the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), which was founded in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI. Amid the considerable confusion engendered by the LSSP's betrayal, the RCL waged a difficult and protracted political struggle for the political independence of the working class on the basis of the principles of socialist internationalism. The SEP can say proudly, and without fear of contradiction, that no other party has stood the test of time. We call on workers, students, intellectuals and rural poor to seriously study our program and perspective and join this party of world socialist revolution.



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