# Sri Lankan university meeting discusses Leon Trotsky & the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification

**Our correspondents**
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About 40 students, lecturers and university workers took part in a discussion at Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka on August 27 on the book, *Leon Trotsky & the Post-Soviet School of Historical Falsification*. The meeting was organised by the university's Philosophical Association in conjunction with the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE).

Written by David North, national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US), the volume was published last year and deals with the historical falsifications contained in recent biographies of Leon Trotsky by two academics, Geoffrey Swain and Ian D. Thatcher.

At the invitation of the Philosophical Association, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) general secretary Wije Dias introduced the discussion. He began by explaining that the book was the product of the political struggle waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to arm a new generation of socialist fighters with the key lessons of the experiences of the working class throughout the past century.

"The theoretical and political role played by Trotsky in those struggles is central to understanding this history, which is vital to illuminate the objectively necessary political path that must be taken by revolutionaries in the present period," Dias said.

Quoting from North's essay, Dias explained that the biographies of Trotsky by the two university professors, Swain and Thatcher, were clearly aimed at a student audience. As North noted: "The authors know, of course, that the books will be the first acquaintance with Trotsky for most of their readers; and they have crafted these two books in a manner calculated to disabuse readers of any further interest in their subject. As Professor Swain proclaims with evident satisfaction in the first paragraph of his volume, 'Readers of this biography will not find their way to Trotskyism'."

Dias said the publication of the two distorted biographies had to be placed in a broader political context. Global economic restructuring within world capitalism had produced a deep-going political crisis, exemplified by the collapse of all parties and organisations based on the program of national reformism. Characterising the two works as a "preemptive strike against the reemergence of Trotsky's influence," North had explained: "At some point the intensification of class conflict will find political expression. There will be a search for alternatives to the present set-up. This will create an intellectual and social constituency for the revival of interest in the history of the socialist movement, in the revolutionary struggles of the past. It is inevitable that the development of such a climate will lead to a renewed interest in the life and work of Leon Trotsky."

Dias pointed to the wave of the triumphalism in bourgeois circles following the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991, in which commentators had proclaimed that history could not progress beyond capitalism and that the Soviet system had been doomed from the outset. He explained that North had identified the fundamental flaw in this method of analysis, which had also been adopted by Swain and Thatcher. They all wrote off the historical fact that there was a socialist opposition, which clearly understood Stalinism as the gravedigger of the 1917 October Revolution, and which valiantly fought against Stalinism in defence of the gains of the revolution on the basis of the program of international socialism.

Quoting North, Dias raised the question: "Had the Soviet Union pursued different policies at various points in its 74-year history, might that have produced a significantly different historical outcome?" To underscore the fact that alternatives did exist in the Soviet Union, he drew an important parallel with the history of the working class in Sri Lanka.

"It is quite possible," Dias explained, "that the present generation of students who have grown up under conditions of a civil war, carried out by successive capitalist governments, and the collapse of the old parties of the left, including the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), is unaware that a struggle of revolutionary proportions erupted in this country in August 1953, exactly 55 years ago. It was called the Hartal—a general strike by the working class supported by the rural masses. That struggle brought the whole capitalist administration to a halt and the United National Party government to the verge of collapse.

"It is debatable whether the working class could have taken political power at that particular time, but it is important to consider the lessons drawn from that struggle by the political parties of the two main classes in capitalist society—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The LSSP, which had been adapting to the nation state and parliamentary politics, decided not to engage again in any struggle that challenged the capitalist establishment. The bourgeoisie concluded that it had to pursue far more

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vigorously a policy of divide and rule, by whipping up Sinhala racism against the Tamil minority. The policy of making Sinhala the only state language was brought to the centre of bourgeois politics.

"If we make a comparison with Russian history, we could say that the 1953 Hartal was equivalent to the 1905 revolution in Russia—a dress rehearsal for the victorious revolution in October 1917. Out of the experience of 1905 and an examination of its world context, Trotsky elaborated the theory of Permanent Revolution to educate, organise and mobilise the working class, completely independently of all factions of the bourgeoisie, in order to win political power with the support of the peasantry. This was the perspective that was realised in the October Revolution by the Bolshevik party under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky.

"The LSSP did the exact opposite after 1953. It signed a no-contest pact with the capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Solomon Bandaranaike that brought his party to power in 1956. The LSSP acted as a loyal parliamentary opposition within the capitalist order. On this national opportunist path, the LSSP ended up joining the government of Madam Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. The LSSP's betrayal of Trotskyist principles and the political independence of the working class took place as the working class was preparing, yet again, for a major confrontation against the government. The 21-demand movement had galvanised all sections of workers across communal and ethnic lines. Prime Minister Bandaranaike publicly admitted that the situation in the country had become ungovernable. The LSSP's entry into her government had catastrophic political consequences for the working class, not just in Sri Lanka, but throughout the region.

"Now, if we paraphrase North's question about the Soviet Union, we could ask: Had the LSSP pursued a different policy in 1964 and not abandoned the struggle for the political independence of the working class, might there not have been a significantly different historical outcome? Would that not have cut across the communal politics of the ruling elite and prevented the emergence of the petty bourgeois chauvinist organisations such as the JVP in the south and the LTTE in the north? Would that not have created the real possibility of establishing workers' power, under conditions where cracks were already beginning to appear in the post-war capitalist world order?

"These are not hypothetical issues. There was an alternative to the class collaborationist policy of the LSSP. While the LSSP claimed to be a section of the Trotskyist Fourth International, it had refused to join the International Committee of the Fourth International, which had waged a struggle since 1953 against the Pabloite revisionists who had abandoned the program of Trotskyism, including the theory of Permanent Revolution. The Pabloites' opportunism suited the LSSP and its nationalist orientation. The LSSP received every encouragement from the Pabloites in its political backsliding, as it became an appendage of the very capitalist rule responsible for the incalculable social destruction of the past 44 years."

Dias explained that the Revolutionary Communist League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, was founded in 1968 to fight for the resurgence of Trotskyism in the working class in Sri Lanka and throughout the region. He concluded by re-emphasising the importance of the historical clarifications presented in North's essay for politically arming the present generation. "Without the historical bearings that illuminate the path for the socialist transformation of society, it is impossible to find a progressive way out of the present catastrophe confronting working people and youth throughout the world," Dias said.

During the discussion that followed, two Buddhist monks and a lay student—all members of the communal Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU)—tried to create a diversion. In order to garner support for the JHU's reactionary campaign of anti-Christian violence, one of the Buddhist monks accused the speaker of not mentioning the role of the Christian church in supporting the monarchy in Russia. Attempting to deny the possibility of socialist revolution in Sri Lanka, he insisted that social conditions in Russia had been far worse than anything one could find in Sri Lanka today.

In reply, Dias pointed out that the Christian church in old Russia had played a pernicious role, similar to that of the Buddhist establishment in Sri Lanka today in propping up the Colombo establishment, propagating Sinhala chauvinism and supporting the Rajapakse government's reactionary war against the Tamil minority. As for social conditions, Dias pointed out that more than 200,000 people had been killed during the previous two decades due to the war in the north and bloody repressions in the south. Another 400,000 had been displaced from their homes and land, and left to rot in squalid refugee camps. In total that was nearly 3 percent of the island's population.

Dias went on to describe the intolerable economic burdens facing working people—urban and rural—with inflation running at more than 40 percent for basic food items. These difficult conditions, he said, might not be felt by the Buddhist monks, who continued to receive their alms from gullible devotees, but they were driving working people to look for an alternative to capitalism. At this point, the JHU supporters interjected to denounce the speaker and appeal for support but, finding themselves completely isolated, were forced to retreat. Several members of the audience rose to oppose their antics.

Many students stayed after the meeting to speak with ISSE and SEP members. They expressed a willingness to learn more about the historical experiences of the working class and interest in the struggle for a socialist alternative. Several condemned the anti-democratic methods used by the JHU and other chauvinists to stifle political discussion, and recalled the way in which JVP thugs had broken up an ISSE book exhibition on the same campus one year ago.

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