

The war in Sri Lanka: the political and class issues

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) demands an immediate end to the criminal war being waged by the Sri Lankan government against the country's Tamil minority and the unconditional withdrawal of all security forces from the North and East of the island. President Mahinda Rajapakse and the entire Colombo political establishment are responsible for the 25-year conflict that has created a catastrophe for the Tamil population and for working people throughout the island.

The government's offensive against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) underscores the contempt of the Sri Lankan ruling elite for the lives of ordinary working people. The military is pounding the remaining LTTE-held areas with artillery and from the air, indifferent to the fate of the Tamil civilians who are trapped there without the basic necessities of life. Hundreds have been killed and many more injured. At the same time, thousands of Sinhala youth, dragooned into the army through the force of economic necessity, have been sacrificed in wave after wave of frontal assaults on entrenched LTTE positions.

Speaking on February 4 at a ceremony to mark 61 years of independence, Rajapakse promised "a new era of democracy" once the North was "liberated from terrorism". Every word is a lie. The government has not been waging a war of liberation against terrorism, but a vicious communal war that is the product of decades of anti-Tamil discrimination. Its purpose is not to establish democracy, but to consolidate the Sinhala supremacist state and defend the privileges of the Sinhala elites against the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working class.

In conducting his "war on terrorism", Rajapakse mimics Washington and backs its war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan, in return for US support. For its part, the US has supported Colombo's assault on the LTTE as a means of securing its economic and strategic interests in the region. The conflict in Sri Lanka, like the recent Israeli assault on Gaza, demonstrates the methods that imperialism will use more broadly as the global economic crisis deepens and Great Power rivalry intensifies.

The LTTE bears its share of political responsibility for the terrible outcome of Colombo's aggression. It has never been oriented towards the working class. Its program represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, which has sought to secure its own privileges by establishing a separate capitalist state. The program of Tamil separatism mirrors the Sinhala supremacism of the Colombo establishment and entrenches communal divisions. Far from uniting working people against anti-Tamil discrimination, the LTTE blames the "Sinhala nation". Its violent attacks on Sinhalese civilians have played directly into the government's hands, and its separatist perspective is what has led to its current political isolation. Facing military collapse, the LTTE is reduced to issuing futile appeals to the very powers backing Rajapakse's war.

The SEP warns that the army's advances against the LTTE are setting the stage for a savage assault on the working class. The war on the Tamil masses has been accompanied at every stage by attacks on the democratic rights and living standards of workers. Rajapakse has repeatedly demanded that working people sacrifice for the war. Having mortgaged the country to pay for it, he now confronts the worst global recession since the 1930s. Again working people will be forced to bear the burden.

The entire political establishment has fallen in behind Rajapakse. The conservative United National Party (UNP) has disavowed the 2002 ceasefire that it signed with the LTTE and praises the government for its military successes. UNP leaders even claim some credit for the war, saying their peace negotiations were just a clever ruse to allow the army to regroup and rebuild. The Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) boasts that it was responsible for pressuring Rajapakse to restart the war. The Tamil National Alliance, which functioned as the LTTE's political mouthpiece following the ceasefire, has now opportunistically distanced itself from the LTTE leadership.

The LTTE's defeat will only strengthen the most right-wing, militarist layers of the Colombo establishment. The Rajapakse regime already functions as a military-political camarilla contemptuous of parliament, the courts and the law. Far from preparing to demobilise troops in the event of the LTTE's defeat, the government has authorised a huge expansion of the army from 150,000 to 200,000 personnel. Like the "liberated" North and East, the whole island is being turned into a vast armed camp. This apparatus of state repression, including concentration camps and death squads, will soon be turned against workers, farmers and youth fighting to defend their democratic rights and living conditions.

The SEP insists that only by uniting against nationalism and communalism, and breaking from all factions of the ruling elite, can the working class put an end to the war. Workers of all backgrounds have a common class enemy—the Rajapakse government and the profit system it defends. They must begin to rely on their own strength and, on the basis of a socialist perspective, win to their side the oppressed rural masses in the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government.

Historical roots

The war has blighted the lives of an entire generation. Without drawing up a historical balance sheet and extracting the necessary political lessons,

it is impossible for the working class to take a step forward. Above all, this history is a striking confirmation of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which explains the organic inability of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development to carry out basic democratic tasks, and, therefore, the necessity of the proletariat advancing its own program based on socialist internationalism.

While the war erupted in 1983, its roots go back to the 1947-48 deals that ended British colonial rule in South Asia. Terrified at the prospect of revolutionary upheavals throughout the Indian subcontinent, the nascent national bourgeoisie worked hand in hand with British imperialism to abort the anti-colonial movement and to impose a settlement that met its interests at the expense of working people. The resulting carve-up led to the partition of the British Raj into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India that precipitated a wave of communal violence costing millions of lives.

The establishment of an independent Sri Lanka, known then as Ceylon, was also a political abortion. Even in comparison to the leaders of the Indian National Congress who mounted controlled mass protests against British rule, the founders of Sri Lanka played a particularly venal role. Fearful that the revolutionary convulsions sweeping the subcontinent would cut across their own plans for a separate state, the local bourgeois politicians were hostile to the anti-colonial movement in Ceylon and demanded not independence, but Dominion status with continuing ties to London. Their narrow, parochial interests coincided with those of British imperialism, which wanted to retain the island as a base of operations in volatile South Asia.

The leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle in British Ceylon fell to the Fourth International and the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI). The BLPI based its perspective on building a party to unite the working class on a socialist basis, not just in Sri Lanka, but throughout the Indian subcontinent. In opposing the wretched 1948 independence agreement, the BLPI warned that the "bribed and pampered" Ceylonese bourgeoisie was collaborating with British imperialism in turning the island into an "Asiatic Ulster, a bastion for Empire against the long-overdue Indian revolution."

The immediate consequence of drawing a national border between India and Sri Lanka was to call into question the status of one million Tamil-speaking plantation workers brought from India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—one tenth of the island's population. Facing an insurgent working class and desperate to consolidate its rule, one of the first acts of the new United National Party (UNP) government was to cut short negotiations with India over the future of the plantation workers and deprive them of citizenship. While sections of the Tamil bourgeoisie acquiesced, the BLPI opposed this flagrant attack on basic democratic rights and warned that the UNP was applying the communal principle that "the state must be coeval with the nation, and the nation with the race."

Over subsequent decades, Sinhala supremacism became the most potent weapon in the political armoury of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. In response to political crises and, above all, upheavals of the working class, Colombo politicians inflamed communal tensions and set Sinhalese against Tamils. Following the 1953 Hartal (general strike) that shook bourgeois rule to its foundations, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its leader S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike emerged as the proponents of left-sounding Sinhala populism. They mixed denunciations of the British colonial past and socialistic phrasemongering with the reactionary perspective of transforming the island into a Sinhala Buddhist state at the expense of the Tamil and Muslim minorities. After winning office in

1956, Bandaranaike implemented his policy of making Sinhala the only official language, reducing Tamil speakers to the status of second-class citizens.

The LSSP betrayal

The subsequent history of Sri Lanka cannot be comprehended without examining the far reaching consequences of the subsequent history of the BLPI, which was amalgamated with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1950. While initially opposing the "Sinhala only" policy, the LSSP leaders increasingly adapted to the SLFP's left populism and joined the bourgeois SLFP government of Bandaranaike's widow in 1964. The LSSP's abandonment of the principled struggle to unite Sinhalese and Tamils on a class basis to fight for socialism created great confusion in the Sri Lankan working class, opening the door for the flourishing of communal politics. The emergence of radical petty bourgeois tendencies—the JVP among Sinhala rural youth and the LTTE among young Tamils—can be directly traced to the LSSP's betrayal of the principles of socialist internationalism.

The bitter fruit of the 1964 betrayal was realised in the SLFP-LSSP coalition government of 1970-77. After brutally suppressing a JVP-inspired uprising in 1971, the SLFP sought to shore up its political base by implementing blatantly discriminatory policies against the Tamil minority. The new constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, drawn up by LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva, entrenched Buddhism as the state religion. De Silva also oversaw the "nationalisation" of the plantations—that is, the replacement of private owners with Sinhala management—and the forced repatriation of plantation workers to India. In response to the "standardisation" of university entrance, which discriminated heavily in favour of Sinhala students, Tamil youth became radicalised. The result was the formation of groups such as the LTTE, which advocated armed struggle for a separate Tamil state.

Amid the global downturn of 1975-76, the Bandaranaike government's economic policies—national regulation dressed up as "socialism"—produced a catastrophe that was exploited by the UNP to win a landslide victory in 1977. The government of J.R. Jayawardene was one of the first in the world to implement free market policies in a bid to turn the island into a cheap labour platform for foreign capital. His deep inroads into public sector services, jobs and conditions provoked resistance from the working class, culminating in the general strike of 1980. Confronting continuing social unrest and a global economic downturn, Jayawardene turned to the tried and tested methods of communal politics. Isolated armed attacks by Tamil separatists were exploited as the pretext for anti-Tamil repression, provocations and, in 1983, a terrible island-wide pogrom that set the stage for Jayawardene to launch all-out war.

Over the subsequent 25 years, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie turned to two basic policies—the full integration of the island into global capitalism as a cheap labour platform, and war. This has posed a dilemma to every government: while the conflict has become a barrier to economic development, any attempt to end it has foundered against Sinhala supremacism, which has become the most essential prop for bourgeois rule. A quarter century of communal conflict has created powerful vested interests in the military, state bureaucracy, Buddhist hierarchy and sections of business, and every government that has attempted a

compromise with the LTTE has confronted virulent opposition from them.

After six decades, no-one can be in any doubt about the reactionary logic of Sinhala populism, even in its most "radical" form. The JVP, which styled itself on the "armed struggle" of Mao Zedong and Che Guevara in the 1960s, had, by the late 1980s, become the most fervent advocate of communal war. It bitterly opposed Jayawardene's attempt to end the conflict through the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord. Its ingrained hostility to the working class was openly revealed when its armed gangs gunned down hundreds of workers, union militants and political opponents who refused to follow orders and support its campaign. In the 1990s, the former JVP guerrillas became part of the Colombo political establishment and in 2004-05 joined the SLFP-led government, helping to implement its free market agenda. Though now formally in opposition, the JVP has backed Rajapakse's war, voted for his military budgets and repeatedly sabotaged any trade union struggle that threatened to challenge his government.

Tamil separatism

For the Tamil masses, communalism in the form of Tamil separatism has also proven to be a deadly political trap. The LTTE's chief ideologue, the late Anton Balasingham, falsely claimed that the "right to self-determination" was an inviolable principle sanctified by Marxism. There is, however, nothing inherently progressive in the call for a separate Tamil state. The demand for an independent Eelam was first advocated by the bourgeois Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in the 1970s, reflecting the frustrations of the Tamil elites who had been forced for decades to play second fiddle to their Sinhala counterparts. The reaction of the Tamil bourgeoisie to Bandaranaike's intensified anti-Tamil discrimination was to call for the formation its own capitalist state—to exploit its own working class.

The LSSP's betrayal blocked the working class from elaborating an independent alternative to unify all workers in a common struggle, based on a socialist program, against the Colombo regime. The LSSP's presence in the Bandaranaike government was seized upon by the Tamil youth who formed the LTTE as evidence that Marxism and Trotskyism had failed. While the LTTE made references to socialism, its program was essentially that of the bourgeois TULF. Its differences with the TULF were purely tactical. Frustrated with the TULF's failed electoral manoeuvring, the LTTE took up arms to fight for a separate state.

The LTTE's military collapse is a product of its class orientation and political perspective. Behind its cult of the armed struggle lies deep-seated class hostility to the development of the political consciousness of the working class and to its independent mobilisation on a socialist basis. The LTTE's fighters not only targeted the Sri Lankan security forces and political leaders, but ordinary Sinhala workers and villagers, deliberately inflaming communal hatred and providing fuel for the government's propaganda machine. The organisation ruthlessly enforced its claim to be the sole representative of the Tamil people through the suppression and murder of its political opponents. In areas under its control, the LTTE displayed its contempt for the masses by imposing an anti-democratic regime that stamped out dissent, imposed heavy taxes, conscripted youth and subordinated every organisation to its control. Such measures generated fear, resentment and hostility—not political respect and loyalty.

Despite its militant rhetoric, the LTTE's plans for a separate state have depended, in the final analysis, on securing international backing from various major and minor powers. Time and again the LTTE's pragmatic manoeuvring with one or other power ended in disaster. Having staked everything on India's support, the LTTE accepted the entry of Indian troops into northern Sri Lanka under the 1987 Indo-Lankan Accord, only to discover that New Delhi's ambitions did not coincide with its own. Embittered by the fighting that erupted as Indian troops tried to disarm its own fighters, the LTTE lashed out and assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991—a step that further weakened its position on the international arena.

The LTTE was caught completely unawares by the rapid shift in international relations that followed the end of the Cold War. Like the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the Middle East and the African National Congress in South Africa, the LTTE responded by openly embracing the ideology of the free market and seeking an accommodation with imperialism. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, it manoeuvred desperately to avoid becoming a target of the Bush administration's "war on terrorism"—signing a ceasefire in 2002, abandoning its demand for an independent Eelam and entering talks for a power-sharing arrangement. Negotiations quickly broke down as it became clear that the US and India had no interest in according the LTTE anything other than a minor role in Sri Lankan politics.

As Rajapakse plunged the island back to war in 2006, the entire "international community" turned a blind eye to his government's blatant breaches of the 2002 ceasefire and abuse of democratic rights. The US backed the renewed war, providing military assistance, political support and diplomatic muscle to pressure the EU and Canada to ban the LTTE. American allies Israel and Pakistan sold the Sri Lankan military much of the hardware it needed. Despite its unease about potential unrest among its own Tamil population, India gave political and military backing to the Sri Lankan government in order to pre-empt its rivals—Pakistan and China. Beijing was supplying money and arms with no questions asked.

Isolated internationally, the LTTE confronted a Sri Lankan army greatly strengthened in firepower and numbers. At home, the LTTE's political base had been eroded by the failure of the 2002 ceasefire to bring improvements in living standards and by its own repressive methods. As rival factions tried to shore up their support, a debilitating split erupted in 2004, with breakaway leaders led by Karuna in the eastern province accusing their northern counterparts of monopolising the spoils of office. The rupture was a significant factor in the ability of the army, with the aid of Karuna's militia, to drive the LTTE out of the East by mid-2007, and to focus its resources on the North.

Among Tamil workers, youth and intellectuals inside Sri Lanka and around the world, there are well-grounded fears that the army's defeat of the LTTE will bring a new wave of persecution and repression. Tamil workers and youth cannot defend themselves, however, by clinging to the perspective of Tamil separatism. They must make a decisive break with communal politics. They must begin to turn to their class brothers and sisters throughout the island, South Asia and internationally, who confront the same deepening assault on democratic rights and living standards. Only by uniting on the basis of a socialist program can the working class mobilise the oppressed masses behind it and mount an offensive against the real source of social inequality, communalism and war—the profit system itself.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only organisation that fights for this

perspective in Sri Lanka and the subcontinent. The revolutionary struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam is only possible as an integral component of the fight for socialism in South Asia and around the world. Sri Lanka is a microcosm of political processes underway throughout the subcontinent. Six decades after independence, the vast majority of the population in South Asian countries remains mired in economic backwardness and poverty. The region has been convulsed by wars and outbursts of communal violence that trace their roots to the unresolved questions of the reactionary 1947 partition. As the ruling elites have embraced the free market agenda, the social divide has deepened. That is why they are resorting, once again, to communal and ethnic politics. The perspective of a United Socialist States of South Asia has become a pressing, practical necessity.

The sharpest warning must be drawn from the failure of the ruling elites of the region to oppose the US-led invasion and recolonisation of Afghanistan. The global economic crisis is exacerbating tensions between the major powers and leading to sharpening economic and strategic rivalries. The Indian subcontinent, with its large reservoirs of cheap labour, is being drawn into this web of imperialist intrigue, with disastrous consequences for the working class. In the last global conflagration, British imperialism, with the assistance of its local political agencies and the Stalinist Communist Party of India, drafted hundreds of thousands of Indians as cannon fodder. The willingness of the Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi governments to support the US war in Afghanistan is a sure sign that the bourgeoisie is readying itself, once again, to sacrifice working people in imperialist conflicts.

Since its formation as the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) in 1968, the Socialist Equality Party has fought for the principles of socialist internationalism. As a result, it has faced persecution from all sides—from the state apparatus as well as from the JVP and LTTE. The party has been able to stand firm precisely because it was established on the strongest foundations—the struggle for Marxism as embodied in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against all forms of nationalism and opportunism.

The SEP calls on workers and youth throughout South Asia to oppose the Sri Lankan government's reactionary war, and every variety of nationalism, ethnic discrimination and communalism, as the first step to building a powerful socialist movement throughout the region and internationally. We urge our readers to seriously study the program and perspective of the international Trotskyist movement, as elaborated daily on the *World Socialist Web Site*, and to join and build the SEP and ICFI.



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