

Political implications of the Sri Lankan war

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Fighting in Sri Lanka's protracted civil war has come to a bloody end. Over the weekend, tens of thousands of Tamil civilians streamed out of the small pocket of land held by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that has been pounded relentlessly by the army for weeks. The remaining LTTE fighters have reportedly conceded defeat.

The full extent of the army's crimes has been hidden behind a cloak of censorship. UN figures put the death toll of civilians killed between January 20 and May 7 at 7,000—higher than the total number of casualties this year for the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Gaza combined—and many more have died during the past 10 days. UNICEF spokesman James Elder described the war zone as “an unimaginable hell”, where hundreds of children have been killed. “There couldn't have been a worse place on the planet to be than that very small stretch of beach over the last weeks,” he said.

In Colombo, the government and the media have attempted to whip up enthusiasm over the army's victory. Speaking in Jordan on Saturday, President Mahinda Rajapakse declared he would return to a country “free of terrorism”. While small bands of flag waving, government supporters stood in front of TV cameras, the general mood has been sombre. Despite the media blackout on the war, ordinary people are not blind to the crimes that have been carried out in their name, nor to the plight of the more than 200,000 Tamil civilians herded into squalid, military-run concentration camps.

The urgent political challenge facing working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—is to come to grips with the political implications of the government's

military victory. From the outset, the Sri Lankan civil war was used as a means to divide workers along communal lines and to justify attacks on living standards in the interests of international finance capital and its local partners. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, rejected all along the claim that it was being waged in the interests of all Sri Lankans. It was not a war for working people, but against them.

That proposition has been completely vindicated. In 26 years of communal conflict, the working class has gained nothing but hardship and tragedy. Instead, successive governments have exploited the civil war to undermine and abolish decades of hard-won social and democratic rights.

All workers must reject the nauseating jingoism issuing from the political and media establishment. The SEP says to workers: this was not your war and it is not your victory. We warn that behind the victory parades, a savage new assault is being prepared on the economic and social position of the working class.

For the past three years, the government has squandered untold resources to achieve its victory, doubling its military budget and mortgaging the country to the international banks. With its foreign reserves drained, the country is on the verge of default and bankruptcy.

While declaring a new era of democracy and prosperity, Rajapakse has already foreshadowed an “economic war”. Under the guise of “rebuilding the nation,” the government will unload the economic cost of the past three years, now compounded by the worst global recession since the 1930s, onto the backs of ordinary working people. The new “enemy” will be

workers, farmers and young people who fight to defend their jobs and living standards, and who criticise or oppose the government's policies. The same "left" parties and trade union bureaucrats that supported the war will back the new economic offensive against working people.

To impose its austerity program, the government will not hesitate to harness the same police-state measures that it utilised to prosecute its war against the LTTE. Over the past two and a half decades, the military has vastly expanded in size and political influence. While the shell of parliamentary democracy remains, real power rests with the cabal surrounding the presidency, in which the military chiefs play a decisive role.

Colombo's military victory will only strengthen the most reactionary layers of the ruling elite. Those cheering the loudest today are the Sinhala supremacists of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, Jathika Hela Urumaya, and the National Freedom Front. In the next period, they will be used as shock troops against the struggles and opposition of working people.

Not one of the political issues that led to the war has been resolved. This was not a "war on terrorism" but a war to entrench the power and privileges of the Sinhala elites at the expense of the working class. Far from addressing government-fueled anti-Tamil discrimination, the entire political establishment is inflaming communal tensions, ensuring they will fester and erupt in a new form.

The LTTE bears major responsibility for the catastrophe. Its strategy of a separate capitalist state represented the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not those of the Tamil masses, depending on a combination of terrorism and diplomatic manoeuvring to win support from one or other of the major powers. Its terror attacks on ordinary Sinhalese played directly into the hands of the Colombo regime, and, along with its ruthless suppression of political opposition, alienated large sections of the Tamil community. Its assassination of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi only allowed the Indian government to wash its hands of the fate of Sri Lanka's Tamils.

The working class in Sri Lanka and throughout the subcontinent must draw the necessary political lessons from the war's outcome. Like all forms of nationalism, Tamil separatism has proven to be a reactionary and bloody trap for the masses. The only social force capable of defending basic democratic rights and taking humanity forward is the working class, which, regardless of ethnicity, language or nationality, must unify its struggles on the basis of a socialist program.

The crimes carried out in Sri Lanka are just one symptom of the profound decay of the global capitalist system. Throughout the region and internationally, a new period of imperialist intrigue, rivalry and war is opening up. The US-led neo-colonial war in Afghanistan is being extended to Pakistan, where in recent days a flood of hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees has fled the fighting.

The cornerstone of any struggle by the working class against this barbarism is the adoption of an internationalist perspective. This entails a conscious rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism. The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers and youth throughout Sri Lanka and the region to draw the necessary political conclusions from the Sri Lankan war, to study our program and perspective and to join the fight to build the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership for the struggles ahead.



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