

Sri Lanka: the defeat of the LTTE and the dead-end of nationalism

Bill Van Auken
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The crushing military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has been accompanied by immense suffering by the Tamil people of northern Sri Lanka. The merciless offensive carried out by Sri Lankan army and the right-wing regime of Rajapakse has slaughtered thousands, wounded many more, driven over a million people from their homes and forced hundreds of thousands into wretched internment camps.

The LTTE fighters and their leadership have been massacred in cold blood by the Sri Lankan military. Sympathy for the plight of the Tamil people and for the cruel fate of fighters of the LTTE, however, must not prevent fundamental lessons from being drawn.

In the final analysis, the debacle suffered by the LTTE was the outcome of a perspective that lacked any progressive economic or political rationale: that the answer to government-backed anti-Tamil discrimination was the carving out of a separate ethnically based state for the Tamil minority on one section of the small island of Sri Lanka.

The methods that this movement employed, including terrorist attacks on the majority Sinhalese civilian population, did not represent an excess or a tactical error, but rather were the inevitable product of this false perspective, which was based on the substitution of ethnic struggle for class struggle.

This movement was utterly incapable of making a political appeal to the Sinhalese workers and oppressed or countering the ceaseless attempts of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism. Because of its separatist outlook, it was unable to make such an appeal even to the Tamil workers in India. And its anti-democratic character, which found expression in the ruthless repression of any political opposition—particularly within the working class—in the

areas under its control, led to the disaffection of wide layers of the Sri Lankan Tamil population itself.

From the outset of the civil war 26 years ago, the LTTE's armed struggle was wedded to a strategy of winning the support of one or another of the major powers for setting up a statelet in the North and East of the country.

In 1987, the LTTE's support for the Indo-Lankan accord brought the Indian army into the North of Sri Lanka where it slaughtered thousands of Tamil civilians. The LTTE had agreed to subordinate itself to the Indian bourgeoisie in the vain hope that it would help it create an independent state.

Over the following decades, the LTTE has appealed for imperialist backing, consistently making it clear that its aim in carving out a mini-state on the island was not the betterment of the social conditions of the masses of Tamils, but rather the creation of a capitalist economy that would provide cheap labor for international capital.

The whole experience of the post-war period has demonstrated the bankruptcy of nationalist programs. The formal granting of independence and the creation of new national states in Africa, Asia and the Middle East in no fundamental sense realized the democratic and social aspirations of the masses. Rather these states became the medium for preserving the interests of imperialism and a new national bourgeoisie, while in many cases—as in Sri Lanka—ethnic and communal tensions were manipulated to divide and weaken the working class and oppressed masses.

In the more recent period, all of the so-called national liberation movements, from the PLO in Palestine to the ANC in South Africa, have entered into reactionary settlements with imperialism that imposed new conditions of oppression upon the masses.

Changes in the structure of world capitalism—the development of transnational production and the global integration of finance and manufacturing—have struck at the foundations of these movements as well as all those social and political organizations that based themselves on nationalism.

The military defeat of the LTTE has done nothing to resolve the issues underlying the civil war. It has merely proved that the unity of the Sri Lankan state on a bourgeois basis could only be maintained through bloody repression and atrocities.

The right-wing Sinhalese chauvinist regime in Colombo was in a sense defending its own form of nationalism, the “right” to maintain the unity of the bourgeois state by military force.

In the end, the problems of discrimination and poverty remain, while the Colombo regime’s “victory” has only inflamed the hatred felt for it by masses of Tamil working people.

This bitter experience has confirmed that the struggle against imperialism and the fight to secure democratic rights and equality can only be advanced on the basis of an internationalist program.

And the answer to discrimination and communal oppression is not to be found in a separate state, but rather to unify the oppressed in a common struggle for socialist revolution.

This is the perspective fought for by the International Committee and its section in Sri Lanka, which has now been powerfully vindicated.

While tirelessly defending the democratic rights of the Tamil people against all forms of Sinhalese chauvinism, and demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan army from the North and East of the country, the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party gave no political support to the LTTE. It stressed that the program of this national separatist movement expressed the interests of an aspiring Tamil bourgeoisie, and that Tamil workers and farmers could defend their own interests only by uniting with Sinhalese working people in a common struggle against capitalism.

The tragic events in Sri Lanka mark the end of a whole period, but have resolved none of the country’s profound contradictions. In the period that is now opening up, the SEP’s struggle to unite Tamil and Sinhalese workers against all forms of nationalism and

communalism in a common fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam will provide a way forward for the masses of the island. It will also serve as an internationalist pole of attraction for working people throughout South Asia as part of the struggle for the socialist unification of the working class on a world scale.

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