

Sri Lankan SEP replies to the United Socialist Party

Wije Dias
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Obviously stung by the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) exposure of their opportunist manoeuvres with the right-wing United National Party (UNP) ["The two faces of the United Socialist Party"], the ex-lefts of the United Socialist Party (USP) have been propelled into print to attempt to defend their tawdry politics ["Reply to slanders against heroic United Socialist Party (USP)"].

The USP's reply, which is an open defence of their joint "Platform for Freedom" with the UNP, raises important issues for the working class. The USP claims, even boasts, that its "heroic" stand in forging this "united front" defended democratic rights. The SEP insists that the USP's class collaborationist alliance not only falsely presented the UNP leaders as "democrats," but insofar as workers were drawn in by the ruse, it undermined their ability to defend their rights through their own independent action. In the aftermath of Sri Lanka's presidential election, as President Mahinda Rajapakse deepens his assault on democratic rights, it is essential that working people draw the necessary political lessons.

Before proceeding to the more fundamental issues, it is necessary to deal with the distortions on which the USP's reply rests. The writer denounces the SEP's "scurrilous article" that "slanderingly accuses the USP and its presidential candidate, Siritunga Jayasuriya, of campaigning for Sarath Fonseka," the UNP's presidential candidate. No quotes were produced, nor could they be. The SEP article explained the process quite precisely: the USP did not directly support Fonseka but by joining the UNP in the "Platform of Freedom" in January 2009 it helped provide this discredited bourgeois party with democratic credentials. In turn, these were of great service to the UNP when it backed General Fonseka as its presidential candidate in elections last month.

The USP writer dodges around the issue by declaring that when the Platform for Freedom was formed "the Fonseka factor did not exist". It is certainly true that in January 2009 Fonseka was not a candidate, but the country's top general, and as such shared responsibility with Rajapakse for the military's war crimes and abuses of democratic rights. In fact, the brazen assassination of *Sunday Leader* editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, which prompted the formation of the Platform, was almost certainly carried out by a pro-government death squad allied to the military.

One year later, however, Fonseka had fallen out with Rajapakse, resigned his military post and was standing as the "common candidate" of the UNP and the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Despite the UNP's embrace of the general, the USP's Jayasuriya had no compunction in joining UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe to celebrate the anniversary of the Platform. Jayasuriya did not use the opportunity to denounce the UNP's support for Fonseka, but engaged in mutual backslapping over the "success" of the Platform and pledged to continue it whoever won the presidential election.

Much of the USP reply is taken up with citing the "heroic" achievements of the party and its leader. Heroism, however, is not a political criterion. Fascists, for instance, can display great physical courage in fighting for their reactionary aims. Generally, workers should be wary of petty-bourgeois politicians who puff themselves up and brag about their courage, which is invariably to obscure their politics. So it is in this case.

The United Front

Amid the list of heroics, the USP asserts that its "platform for freedom is not a political alliance, rather a platform to gather voices against huge repression... USP members refused to be silent and were prepared to participate not in a political bloc but in a concrete practical campaign in defence of democratic rights. It was correct not to debar any forces, even those who refuse to go outside the framework of capitalism."

One is entitled to ask: what practical campaign was waged by the Platform—apart from the collective hot air about "democracy" generated by Jayasuriya and his right-wing allies? No section of the working class was mobilised to oppose the operations of the pro-government death squads, to defend workers and their organisations or as part of a political strike against the government. Nor could that have happened. The UNP, an openly bourgeois party, is organically hostile to any action by the working class that would threaten capitalist rule.

Despite its denials, the "Charter of the Platform for Freedom" makes absolutely clear that the USP formed a political bloc with the UNP that committed none of the participants to any practical actions. The short document speaks in the vaguest possible terms about defending "the right to life" and "freedom of expression" in the "four corners and nine provinces of this land and among peoples of all races and creeds". As for practical measures, there is not a word.

In its reply, the USP invokes the names of Lenin and Trotsky as the advocates of this political sham. The writer even caustically declares that he can provide "the learned professors of the WSWs" with the necessary quotes. No need. The SEP is well aware of the differences between the United Front tactic, which has a long history in the Marxist movement, and the type of opportunist alliance with which the USP has been associated throughout its entire political existence and which has always proven a disaster for the working class.

The essence of the United Front is to unite and mobilise the working class to defend its rights against the class enemy using the methods of class struggle. In the process, Marxists take every opportunity to expose the vacillations and duplicity of the opportunist leaders of the working class. The indispensable condition for the formation of a United Front is the political independence of the revolutionary party—no joint political program, no common slogans and no mixing of banners.

Leon Trotsky explained so well as he campaigned for a United Front of the German Communist Party with the Social Democrats in the 1930s against the Nazis: “No common platform with Social Democracy, or with the leaders of the German trade unions, no common publications, banners, placards! Agree only how to strike, whom to strike, and when to strike! Such an agreement can be concluded even with the devil himself, with his grandmother and even with Noske and Grzensinki. On one condition, not to tie one’s own hands.”

This was exactly what the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP’s forerunner, fought for in the late 1980s, when the UNP was in government. The UNP, which had launched the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1983, had signed the Indo-Lanka Accord to allow so-called Indian peacekeepers into the North, freeing the security forces to crush growing unrest in the South. It imposed martial law on the pretext of suppressing the JVP, which opposed the Accord from a reactionary, Sinhala chauvinist standpoint. Hundreds of workers, trade unionists and political activists were being murdered both by the security forces and the fascistic JVP gangs.

The RCL wrote to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the Ceylon Workers Congress and the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), of which Jayasuriya was a leader at the time, proposing a United Front to take practical measures—the formation of workers’ defence squads, joint picket lines, joint demonstrations and the organisation of a general strike against the UNP government.

The NSSP flatly rejected the proposal, accusing the RCL of “sectarianism” for excluding the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP), which it described as “the new proletarian reformist mass tendency”. The SLMP, as the RCL explained at the time, was a bourgeois party, which was to merge with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Its leader, Chandrika Kumaratunga, became the country’s president. The SLFP’s current leader is none other than the current president Rajapakse, whose anti-democratic methods are notorious.

The differences could not have been clearer. Against the RCL’s call for a United Front, the NSSP adamantly defended the type of political bloc that Lenin and Trotsky had always insisted was impermissible for a revolutionary Marxist party. As the RCL pointed out, the NSSP had formed an electoral bloc with the bourgeois SLMP on the basis of a common program for government—“Perspectives and the Way Forward”. This type of Popular Front alliance, promoted by the Stalinists, led to political catastrophes for the working class in France and Spain in the 1930s. The result was no different in Sri Lanka in the 1980s—it paralysed the working class precisely at the point where its independent political mobilisation was so desperately needed.

After toying with the idea of bringing the JVP into the government, UNP President Ranasinghe Premadasa unleashed the security forces against the JVP and Sinhala rural youth throughout the South from 1989 on. An estimated 60,000 young people were slaughtered by the military, its death squads and its network of secret torture chambers and prisons. It should be noted that the present UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, with

whom Jayasuriya shares platforms and presents as a fighter for democracy, was a minister in that UNP government and bears direct political responsibility for its crimes.

On history

The USP, however, is contemptuous of all issues of history. It declares: “In almost all their articles about Sri Lanka, the WSWS refers to certain historical events and blame everything on the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and say little about their Healyite tradition, which is nothing to be proud of. Even recent events are explained as part of the betrayal of the LSSP. History is much more complicated than that. As Marxists, it is important to understand historical failures but it is important to take into consideration the epoch we are in, and apply Marxist methods to understand the period, rather than blaming everything on a single reference in history.”

Anyone wanting to learn more is left hanging in mid-air. Nothing is explained. This frivolous attitude toward historic questions is a hallmark of petty-bourgeois organisations. Jayasuriya would prefer not to recall any history, particularly that of his own organisation, whose record is a litany of opportunist manoeuvres and political shipwrecks that have cost the working class dearly. The working class, however, can only go forward to the extent that it learns the essential lessons from its own strategic experiences in Sri Lanka and internationally. The history makes clear that the USP has nothing to do with Marxism or principled revolutionary politics.

The betrayal of the LSSP, which joined the bourgeois government of Madame Sirama Bandaranaike in 1964 amid widespread working class agitation, had a profound impact on the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. It was the first time that an ostensibly Trotskyist party had openly abandoned the principles of socialist internationalism. As a result, in the absence of a struggle for class unity, communal politics, including the petty-bourgeois guerrillaism of the JVP and LTTE, flourished. While the LSSP’s betrayal did not determine all subsequent history, it is impossible to understand subsequent developments, including the eruption of civil war, without understanding its consequences.

In 1964, Gerry Healy, the leader of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), went to Colombo and campaigned outside the LSSP congress that sanctioned its entry into the Bandaranaike government. Healy identified the roots of the betrayal in the opportunist tendency that emerged inside the Fourth International in the early 1950s led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. The Pabloites accommodated to the post-war restabilisation of capitalism and to the dominant Stalinist, Social Democratic and bourgeois nationalist leaderships.

The ICFI, of which the SEP is the Sri Lankan section, was formed in 1953 to combat Pabloite opportunism and defend the principles of Trotskyism. The Committee for a Workers International—the opportunist “international” with which the USP is currently aligned—traces its roots back to the late Ted Grant, who had similar views to Pablo and Mandel and for a period held the franchise for the British section of the Pabloite international.

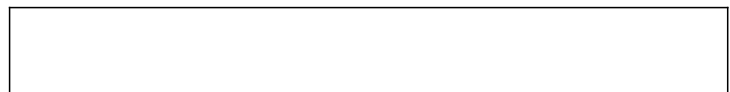
In his pamphlet *Ceylon: The great betrayal*, Healy explained: “The degeneration [of the LSSP] is inextricably bound up with the struggle inside the international Trotskyist movement. It constitutes the most complete example of betrayal by Pablo and his European allies, Germain [Mandel] and Pierre Frank”. He emphasised: “The answer lies not in Ceylon, but in an international study of the struggle against Pabloite revisionism. The real architects of the coalition reside in Paris.” The Pabloites, who had sanctioned and condoned the LSSP’s backsliding for years, had paved the way for the coalition government in Colombo.

The RCL, which was formed in 1968, was forged on these lessons and proudly defends this heritage of Healy. It was only on this basis that the RCL together with the ICFI was able wage a political fight against Healy’s subsequent political degeneration that culminated in the 1985–86 split with the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP)—the SLL’s successor. While the ICFI examined in detail and drew the necessary lessons from the WRP’s betrayals, it nevertheless recognised the enormous political role that Healy had played, particularly in the 1960s, in defending the principles of Trotskyism.

It is not surprising that the USP would prefer that the LSSP’s betrayal was forgotten. Jayasuriya, together with the NSSP leader Wickremabahu Karunaratna, remained inside the LSSP for more than a decade afterward. The Bandaranaike government collapsed in 1965, but a second coalition government came to power in 1970 with the LSSP in key ministerial posts. Jayasuriya and Karunaratna remained inside the LSSP as the coalition government suppressed the 1971 JVP uprising, killing an estimated 15,000 youth, imposed a communal constitution that made Buddhism the state religion, imposed discriminatory measures against Tamils in education and accelerated the forced repatriation of Tamil plantation workers to India. Like true opportunists, they only quit the party after the LSSP became so reviled among workers that it was annihilated in the 1977 general election.

Jayasuriya and Karunaratna formed the NSSP in 1978, and subsequently parted ways to head their own outfits, but they never broke from the politics of coalitionism—that is, of class collaboration. It would indeed be impossible from a “single reference in history”—the LSSP’s betrayal in 1964—to predict all of the political somersaults and backflips performed by the NSSP and the breakaway USP. But the class character of all of their manoeuvres is in line with the stance they took in 1964—to subordinate the working class to one or other section of the bourgeoisie and block its independent political mobilisation. Increasingly these parties have become integrated into the Colombo political establishment itself.

It is time that workers and young people drew a balance sheet of these experiences with opportunist politics. Events since the presidential poll on January 26 have made clear that the Rajapakse regime is intensifying its attacks on democratic rights even as it prepares a far-reaching assault on the living conditions of the working class. While Rajapakse’s rival General Sarath Fonseka is the initial nominal target, the government’s increasingly autocratic methods are aimed against the working class. If Fonseka had won, he would have adopted similar methods. What is emerging is a new period of revolutionary struggles in which the subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie will prove fatal. Workers and youth must chart a new course: make a serious study of the lessons of history in Sri Lanka and internationally, school themselves in principled Marxist politics and join the SEP as the Sri Lanka section of the ICFI to fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally.





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