

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) holds founding congress

Our correspondents

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held its founding congress in Colombo from May 27 to 29, marking a decisive step forward for the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution established by Leon Trotsky in 1938. The three-day congress followed founding congresses held by the SEP's sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The congress was a thoroughly international event, attended by ICFI representatives from the US, Australia, Canada and Germany, as well as delegates from across Sri Lanka. An ICFI supporter from India and a representative from Marxist Voice in Pakistan, which is in political agreement with the ICFI, were also present. Proceedings were conducted in three languages—Sinhala, Tamil and English.

The congress was prepared through more than a decade of theoretical and political work by the ICFI and the SEP. After intensive discussion prior to and during the congress, the delegates unanimously adopted the SEP's founding perspectives resolution, *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)*, which reviews the key strategic experiences of the struggle for Trotskyism in the Indian subcontinent.

The congress also unanimously adopted *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (US)*, which outlines the political lessons of the international fight for revolutionary Marxism from the origins of Marxism through to the present day.

The congress elected a new Central Committee, which re-elected Wije Dias as SEP general secretary. Kamilasiri Ratnayake and Deepal Jayasekera were elected to the positions of WSWS national editor and SEP assistant general secretary respectively.

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) draws the critical lessons of the struggles waged by the Fourth International for Trotsky's perspective of Permanent Revolution in Sri Lanka and South Asia over the past 75 years and establishes the fundamental political tasks of the SEP.

In its opening section, the document points to the revolutionary implications of the worsening global economic crisis. "In every country, the ruling class seeks to shore up its position at the expense of its international rivals, on the one hand, and by imposing new burdens on the working class, on the other. The former is greatly exacerbating global tensions, conflicts and the drive to war; the latter is fuelling the class struggle and a new period of revolutionary upheavals."

The resolution draws attention to the economic rise of China and India, the shift in the centre of gravity of world politics toward Asia, and rising great power tensions, particularly between the United States and China. At

the same time, it states, "Asia is destined to become a vast arena not only of inter-imperialist rivalries but also of the social revolution." The deterioration of living standards since the global financial crisis erupted in 2008 would drive hundreds of millions of workers across Asia and internationally into action. "Those struggles must be integrated into a global counter offensive to abolish the bankrupt profit system and the outmoded nation state system and to establish a world planned socialist economy."

Central to the document is Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which provided "an integrated conception of world socialist revolution that encompasses the backward colonial and semi-colonial countries as well as the advanced ones." The history of South Asia in the course of the 20th century had repeatedly demonstrated that no section of the bourgeoisie was able to meet the aspirations of the masses for basic democratic rights and decent living standards. Only the working class, through the mobilisation of the oppressed masses in the struggle for power, could fulfil these democratic tasks as part of the socialist revolution.

The resolution traces the rise, decline and ultimate betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). It establishes that the LSSP was not a Trotskyist party at its formation in 1935, but espoused an amorphous socialistic, nationalist anti-colonial program that the document characterises as Samasamajism. The turn by the majority of the LSSP towards the Fourth International took place in 1939 under the impact of the impending world war and Leon Trotsky's letter to Indian workers clarifying a principled proletarian internationalist attitude toward the conflict.

The establishment of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) in 1942 by the LSSP and groups of Trotskyist sympathisers in India marked a decisive advance for the Fourth International in Asia. "It was precisely in its break from the radical, nationalist outlook of Samasamajism and its reorientation on the basis of proletarian internationalism that the BLPI made an indelible contribution to the struggle for Marxism in South Asia and internationally that continues to hold crucial political and theoretical lessons for workers and youth today."

The BLPI's retreat from proletarian internationalism, under the enormous political pressures generated by the postwar restabilisation of world capitalism, was a huge blow to the Trotskyist movement. The BLPI, in contrast to the revived opportunist LSSP, took a principled stand against the partition of India and what the BLPI described as the "fake independence" granted by Britain to Sri Lanka. But the BLPI leaders rapidly adapted to the new post-colonial states, liquidating the party into the petty-bourgeois Socialist Party of India in 1948 and into the LSSP in Sri Lanka in 1950.

Aided and abetted at every step by the post-war opportunist current that emerged in the Fourth International known as Pabloism, the LSSP rapidly degenerated. Although critical of Michel Pablo's pro-Stalinist orientation, the LSSP refused to support the ICFI, which was formed in 1953 to defend the principles of orthodox Trotskyism. During the course of the next decade, the LSSP adapted ever more shamelessly to the Sinhala communalism of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), culminating in the LSSP's complete betrayal in 1964 when it entered the bourgeois government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

The LSSP's open abandonment of the fight for proletarian internationalism had profound consequences for the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. It opened the door for petty-bourgeois radical tendencies based on communalism—the JVP among Sinhala youth in the South and armed Tamil separatist groups such as the LTTE in the North—and paved the way for the island's devastating civil war.

The SEP's forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), was founded in 1968 to draw the necessary political lessons from the LSSP's betrayal and to rearm the working class politically on the basis of the Trotskyist program fought for by the ICFI. As the document explains, the formation of the RCL "was the product of the intersection of the political and theoretical struggle waged by the International Committee against Pabloism and a radicalisation of workers and youth in Sri Lanka that foreshadowed the period of revolutionary upheavals internationally from 1968 to 1975."

The document sums up the lessons of the RCL's principled and courageous struggle against all forms of nationalism and communalism under very difficult conditions in Sri Lanka. Those difficulties were compounded by the political degeneration of the British Socialist Labour League—later the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP)—which had played a central role in the struggle against Pabloism. Its abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution impacted on the RCL's work, in particular in relation to the emergence of armed Tamil separatist groups.

The defeat of the WRP renegades in the 1985-86 split opened a new era in the history of the Fourth International, paving the way for a renaissance of Marxism. Crucial political and theoretical issues, including the attitude of Marxists to the national question, were clarified. Published in 1988, the ICFI's perspective resolution *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International* examined the implications of the globalisation of production and prepared the party and the working class for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the profound changes over the following two decades.

The RCL, and subsequently the SEP, formed in 1996, was the only party in Sri Lanka to consistently oppose the communal war that erupted in 1983, to defend the rights of the island's Tamil minority and to fight to unite the working class and mobilise it independently in the struggle for a United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Eelam. The document pays fitting tribute to those party members who were killed in the struggle for Trotskyism and to the RCL's founding general secretary, Keerthi Balasuriya, who played the leading role in laying the party's political foundations before he died at the age of 39 from a coronary thrombosis in 1987.

The congress resolution concludes: "The International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections alone embody the historical heritage of contemporary Marxism—that is, of Trotskyism. It is on that basis that the SEP and its sister parties of the ICFI seek to educate, mobilise and

unify the international working class, confident that the most far sighted and self sacrificing workers and youth will be won to its banner and provide the material forces for carrying out the world socialist revolution."

In his opening report to the congress, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias emphasised: "As revolutionary struggles are unfolding internationally, the working class and oppressed masses in Sri Lanka and South Asia enter into an explosive political situation. In many ways, Sri Lanka has historically been a forerunner of decisive political developments in the Asian region."

Dias continued: "There is a central theme running through the perspectives document being discussed here. It reviews the historical record of the struggle for the Theory of Permanent Revolution of Trotsky in Sri Lanka and the region. Those historical experiences are the essential guide posts for our present political preparation and the struggles ahead."

Referring to the BLPI's history, he said: "It marked a qualitative change, a rejection of radical petty-bourgeois, nationalist Samasamajism and the adoption of a proletarian internationalist stand in the struggle for genuine independence from British colonialism and socialism. This is a vital part of our heritage. But the BLPI leaders rejoined the LSSP in 1950, and that began a protracted period of turning away from the principles of Trotskyism. After the LSSP's great betrayal in 1964, the RCL undertook the task of mobilising the working class on the basis of the Theory of Permanent Revolution. This was possible only through the intransigent struggle carried out by the ICFI, on an international scale, to defend the Trotskyist program."

Dias explained that South Asia was being caught up in the vortex of intensifying inter-imperialist antagonisms that were propelling the world toward nuclear war. "Under these conditions, we must learn to fight for the political independence of the working class on the basis of internationalism. This means not capitulating to bourgeois nationalism in the struggle against imperialist intrigues, and not capitulating to this or that imperialist power in the fight to overthrow capitalist rule. These are the vital lessons embodied in the struggle based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution and brought out in the document that this congress must adopt."

In delivering greetings to the congress, SEP (US) National Chairman David North focussed on the central importance of the party's history. "Any political party that goes before the working class and asks it to place its trust in this party, has to answer the questions that workers naturally raise: How and on what basis do you claim to be the political leadership of the working class? Why should we give you our trust? Why should we believe that this party is different from all other organisations, which at one time or other claimed to represent socialism and misled us?"

"Our answer is not to tell workers: You should trust us, you should believe us, we are different. No, we say: This is our history, which is summarised in this document. Study this document. It will explain the development of our party over a period of half a century. We have established the relationship between this party and whole historical experience of the working class, not only in Sri Lanka but also internationally in the course of 20th century."

North continued: "Working on history is not some sort of academic review of the past. The present is known through the study of the past. It is precisely because there is a renewal of revolutionary struggles in the present period that the examination of the past experiences of the working

class is all the more essential. This historical approach proceeds along the same line that Trotsky followed in the period of 1905 revolution [in Russia]. In dealing with the enormous revolutionary tasks which confronted the working class in 1905, Trotsky reviewed historical experiences not only in the 19th but also in the 18th century.

“The growing radicalisation of the working class in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan and throughout Asia will immensely transform the authority of this movement in the events to come. This party is going to play a very critical role in actualising the concepts of Permanent Revolution among advanced layers of workers in the region. The entire history of this movement testifies that this is the party that will carry out this historical task.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* will serialise the SEP’s perspectives document in the coming weeks.



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