

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 3

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The World Socialist Web Site is publishing The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) which was adopted unanimously at the party's founding congress in Colombo, 27–29 May, 2011. It appears in 12 parts.

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6. The Quit India movement

6-1. The BLPI's anticipation of a political upheaval in India proved correct. Within months of its formation, the tumultuous Quit India movement erupted in August 1942. Congress had formally opposed the war and its ministers had resigned their posts in the autumn of 1939, but its opposition had been limited to token individual civil disobedience. Following the outbreak of war in the Pacific, Gandhi and the Congress leaders calculated that the imminent danger of a Japanese invasion of India gave them greater leverage with the British. Under conditions of mounting socio-economic dislocation caused by India's subordination to the British war effort, Congress sought to pre-empt the emergence of mass unrest. On August 7, the Congress Working Committee deliberated before huge crowds at the Gowalia Tank Maidan, a large open area in central Bombay, on a resolution that called for mass non-violent struggle for "orderly British withdrawal." In what became a major political blow to the CPI, the Stalinist members of the Working Committee publicly opposed the resolution.

6-2. The BLPI circulated its leaflets at the Bombay meeting, supporting any anti-imperialist struggle that Congress launched and calling for "a mass general political strike against British imperialism", backed by rural no-tax and no-rent campaigns leading up to the seizure of land by peasant committees. In doing so, the BLPI was following the advice contained in Trotsky's letter to Indian workers: "In the event that the Indian bourgeoisie finds itself compelled to take even the tiniest step on the road of struggle against the arbitrary rule of Great Britain, the proletariat will naturally support such a step. But they will support it with their own methods: mass meetings, bold slogans, strikes, demonstrations, and more decisive combat actions, depending on the relationship of forces and the circumstances. Precisely to do this must the proletariat have its hands free. Complete independence from the bourgeoisie is indispensable to the proletariat, above all in order to exert influence on the peasantry, the

predominant mass of India's population." [13]

6-3. Despite his rousing "Do or Die!" speech on August 8, Gandhi's expectation was that the resolution would force the viceroy to open talks. However, the British responded by detaining the entire Congress leadership—a move that unleashed a wave of angry protests and strikes in many parts of the country. The Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha joined the CPI in supporting the suppression of the protests. With top Congress leaders including Gandhi in jail, the Congress Socialists assumed the leadership of the movement, but had no perspective for taking power. They made no orientation to the working class and instead indulged in futile acts of sabotage and peasant guerrillaism. The BLPI threw itself into the protests, turning to sections of workers and students, and participating in or organising demonstrations in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and other cities. It paid a heavy price. Assisted by the Stalinists, who branded the BLPI as "criminals and gangsters who help the Fascists", the police arrested many BLPI members and senior leaders. The Quit India movement involved millions of people and continued for months in the face of brutal police repression. According to official figures, more than 1,000 were killed and 60,000 were imprisoned during the period from August 1942 to March 1943. After the movement ebbed and the British turned back the Japanese army, Congress effectively shelved its Quit India demand for the remainder of the war.

6-4. The BLPI's tenacious struggle enhanced the stature of Trotskyism throughout the region. Under difficult conditions of illegality, police persecution and wartime isolation from the Fourth International, it had oriented to the Quit India movement, above all to the working class, without making the slightest political concession to Congress or the Congress Socialists. However, as the revolutionary wave ebbed, sharp political differences emerged inside the BLPI. The genesis of these differences lay in the transformation of the LSSP into the BLPI—a transformation that had involved a fundamental shift on to a new proletarian-internationalist axis and inevitably generated internal tensions. The initial disputes revolved around Philip Gunawardena's hostility to Doric de Souza's efforts to refashion the BLPI in Sri Lanka as a Leninist party. From Bombay, Gunawardena denounced the "petty bourgeois intellectuals" in Colombo who had turned the party into "a narrow conspiratorial sect entirely cut off from the masses." In 1942, he and N.M. Perera formed a Workers Opposition faction that gathered a layer of trade unionists. De Souza, who led the BLPI's underground work in Sri Lanka during the war, responded by forming a Bolshevik Leninist faction.

6-5. While these factional differences were at first unclear, the end of the Quit India movement brought more fundamental disagreements to

light. Impatient with the size and development of the BLPI, Philip Gunawardena and N.M. Perera issued a document from jail in 1943 entitled “The Indian Struggle—The Next Phase” that argued for an unprincipled fusion with various petty bourgeois formations, including the Congress Socialist Party, in a vaguely defined “United Revolutionary Front.” The scheme was a marked retreat towards the Samasamajist tradition with which the BLPI had broken. At its 1944 congress in Madras, the BLPI emphatically rejected the Gunawardena-Perera document. The adopted resolution declared: “This proposal, we believe, if carried out, can only result in the dissolution of the only party (however small it may be) existing in India today with a clear-cut revolutionary program, and the creation in its place at the best of a broad centrist party.”[14] The dispute, however, remained unresolved and was a harbinger of the political issues that were to emerge with great force following the end of the war.

6-6. The main resolution at the BLPI congress made a detailed analysis of the reasons for the defeat of the Quit India movement. “The basic reason for the August movement not outstripping in any significant manner the bounds of the bourgeois perspectives was the failure of the working class to move into militant class action on a decisive scale,” it stated. While workers had been sympathetic to the protests and had engaged in sporadic strikes, the working class had been held back by the CPI, through its control of the trade union apparatus, and the Congress Socialists, whose orientation was to the peasantry. The resolution laid the basis for deepening the party’s intervention into the working class, particularly after the end of the war.

7. Stalinism betrays post-war revolutionary upheavals

7-1. Trotsky’s prognosis that the bloody horrors and deprivations of the war would bring a post-war revolutionary upsurge was vindicated throughout Asia. The massacres carried out by Japanese imperialism in China, Korea and other countries under its domination were paralleled by the criminal manner in which US imperialism brought the war to an end. The intense American bombing of Japanese cities, including the extensive use of incendiary devices designed to maximise civilian casualties, culminated in the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. The chief aim of these last two atrocities was to demonstrate the devastating power of the new weapon to the Soviet Union and to bring the war in the Pacific to an abrupt halt as the Soviet armies advanced rapidly into China and Korea. Six years of imperialist barbarism, following the acute hardships of the Great Depression, had exposed capitalism before the eyes of humanity. The efforts of the discredited ruling classes to reassert their control provoked determined opposition from the working class and revolutionary upheavals internationally.

7-2. As the Transitional Program explained, the central issue was revolutionary leadership. While the Trotskyists had fought courageously to unify and mobilise the working class against the war, the Fourth International had been seriously weakened by the sheer scale of the repression against its sections—by the so-called democratic powers, the fascists and the Stalinists. Moreover, the Soviet bureaucracy emerged from the war with its prestige enhanced by the Red Army’s victories over the Nazi armies. Stalin, however, was terrified that successful revolutions in the West would give an impetus to a movement of the Soviet working

class against his regime. He struck a series of deals with Roosevelt and Churchill at Tehran (1943), Yalta (February 1945) and Potsdam (July 1945) to help preserve capitalism in return for a limited Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. In France and Italy, where the bourgeois parties were thoroughly compromised by their connivance and outright collaboration with the fascists, the Communist parties, following Moscow’s directives, disarmed resistance fighters, joined capitalist governments as ministers and suppressed any independent activity by the working class. As part of the capitalist government in France, the French Communist Party supported the efforts of French imperialism to regain control over its colonies, including Algeria and Indochina. In Japan, the Communist Party played a no less treacherous role in containing a huge upsurge of the working class. Based on a bizarre version of the Stalinist two-stage theory, the Japanese Communist Party claimed that the American occupation forces were carrying out the “democratic revolution” and, on this basis, subordinated the strike movement of the working class to the dictates of General Douglas MacArthur. As a result, capitalist rule was salvaged and Japan transformed into a crucial ally of US imperialism in Asia.

7-3. The role of Stalinism in betraying the anti-colonial movements in Asia was also vital to the global restabilisation of capitalism. The end of the war generated an anti-imperialist movement of the masses throughout the region of unparalleled scope and intensity. The crushing Japanese defeat of the old European powers during the conflict had shattered the basis for their Asiatic empires. In every case, whether that of the French in Indo-China, the Dutch in Indonesia or the British in Malaya and the Indian subcontinent, the attempt by the former colonial rulers to resume control of their possessions met with mass opposition. In China and Korea, the collapse of Japanese rule gave rise to broad movements against the dictatorial regimes that US imperialism sought to install.

7-4. In *War and the Fourth International* written in 1934, Trotsky had paid special attention to the colonial and semi-colonial countries of the East, explaining: “Their struggle is doubly progressive: tearing the backward peoples from Asiaticism, sectionalism and foreign bondage, they strike powerful blows at the imperialist states. But it must be clearly understood beforehand that the belated revolutions in Asia and Africa are incapable of opening up a new epoch of renaissance for the national state. The liberation of the colonies will be merely a gigantic episode in the world socialist revolution, just as the belated democratic overturn in Russia, which was also a semi-colonial country, was only the introduction to the socialist revolution.” Thus the democratic tasks of the post-war anti-colonial struggles could only be achieved under the leadership of the working class as part of the broader struggle for socialism internationally: but that road was blocked by Stalinism.

7-5. Throughout South East Asia, the Stalinist parties were instrumental in derailing the post-war anti-colonial struggles with far-reaching consequences for which the working class and oppressed masses are still paying. None of the states established in the region after World War II has been able to meet the aspirations of working people for basic democratic rights and a decent standard of living. In Indonesia, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) subordinated the working class to the nationalist movement led by Sukarno even as he manoeuvred first with the Dutch, then the US. In return for Washington’s support for independence, Sukarno carried out a bloody crackdown on the PKI in 1948 in which thousands of PKI members were killed. That did not stop the PKI from renewing its alliance with Sukarno paving the way for the CIA-backed military coup of 1965–66 that resulted in the deaths of at least 500,000 PKI members, workers and peasants, and three decades of dictatorship. In Malaya, the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and its Malayan People’s

Anti-Japanese Army openly welcomed the return of British forces and collaborated with the new British administration as it sought to re-establish itself. Having consolidated its control by 1948, Britain turned on the MCP and over the next decade ruthlessly crushed its guerrilla forces before handing over power to the conservative Malay communal party—the United Malays National Organisation—that has dominated Malaysia ever since. The MCP’s support for Lee Kuan Yew and his People’s Action Party laid the basis for the present-day one-party police state in Singapore.

7-6. The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) led by Ho Chi Minh played an especially criminal role in assisting France to re-establish control over their colonies. Following the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the Stalinists formed a provisional government with bourgeois parties and sought to barter with the British and French as their military forces landed. The Trotskyists of the *La Lutte* group and the League of International Communists fought for the independent mobilisation of the working class and urban and rural poor amid a burgeoning movement for national independence. Mass demonstrations erupted in Saigon, peoples’ committees began to mushroom and a provisional central committee was established. As tensions sharpened in September 1945, the Stalinists disarmed the peoples’ committees, suppressed the provisional central committee and murdered scores of Trotskyists, including *La Lutte* leader Ta Thu Thau. Far from securing independence, the ICP’s collaboration with the French only helped restore colonial rule in the south. The Vietnamese people were to pay a horrific price for the betrayal of the post-war revolutionary upsurge and the subsequent manoeuvring of the Stalinists with French and then American imperialism. Thirty years of war left the country devastated and millions dead.

7-7. The Stalinist betrayals in Europe and Asia enabled the United States, which emerged from the war as the dominant imperialist power, to implement a series of initiatives to stabilise the world capitalist economy. The Bretton Woods agreement established the dollar as a stable global currency by pegging it against gold at a fixed rate; the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade aimed to expand trade and prevent a return to the disastrous protectionist policies of the 1930s; and the US provided substantial aid to rebuild the shattered economies of Western Europe and Japan. Having gained a measure of capitalist stability, US imperialism launched its “Cold War” counteroffensive against “Communism.” The opening shots were US support for right-wing regimes in Greece and Turkey, and the launching of the Marshall Plan that transformed Western Europe into an anti-Soviet bloc, but these soon extended into a global confrontation. The US responded to the 1949 revolution in China with a massive military intervention in Korea to prop up its right-wing dictatorial regime in Seoul. The 1950–53 Korean War cost the lives of millions and left the peninsula permanently divided and scarred.

8. The Chinese Revolution

8-1. In China, the political difficulties confronting the working class in the immediate post-war period were presented very starkly. In the wake of the defeat of the 1925–27 revolution, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) retreated to the rural hinterland and increasingly based itself on the peasantry. While retaining its links with the Third International and the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, the CCP’s turn to the peasantry shifted the party’s class axis away from the proletariat. The CCP’s Stalinist ideology based on the two-stage theory and class collaboration

with the national bourgeoisie was also infused with peasant populism and the strategy and tactics of guerrilla warfare. Mao Zedong, who had always been on the right-wing of the party, assumed leadership of the CCP in 1935 and accentuated the party’s orientation towards the peasantry. The Chinese Left Opposition, which formed after 1927, remained in the urban centres and oriented to the working class despite widespread repression by the Kuomintang, which was aided by the Stalinists.

8-2. In a farsighted letter to Chinese supporters in 1932, Trotsky warned of the dangers that the working class could face from Mao’s peasant armies. Explaining the fundamentally different class orientation of the peasantry, Trotsky wrote: “The peasant movement is a mighty revolutionary factor insofar as it is directed against the large landowners, militarists, feudalists and usurers. But in the peasant movement itself are very powerful proprietary and reactionary tendencies and at a certain stage it can become hostile to the workers and sustain that hostility already equipped with arms. He who forgets about the dual nature of the peasantry is not a Marxist. The advanced workers must be taught to distinguish from among ‘communist’ labels and banners the actual social processes.”[15]

8-3. Trotsky further explained: “The true Communist Party is the organisation of the proletarian vanguard. But we must not forget that the working class of China has been kept in an oppressed and amorphous condition during the last four years, and only recently has it evinced signs of revival. It is one thing when a Communist Party, firmly resting on the flower of the urban proletariat, strives through the workers to lead a peasant war. It is altogether another thing when a few thousand or even tens of thousands of revolutionists, who are truly communists or only take the name, assume the leadership of a peasant war without having any serious support from the proletariat. This is precisely the situation in China. This acts to augment to an extreme the danger of conflicts between the workers and armed peasants.”[16]

8-4. The CCP, following the line dictated from Moscow, formed a Popular Front alliance with Chiang Kai-shek’s regime against the Japanese armies that invaded China in 1937. Trotsky insisted that the war by China, an oppressed nation, against Japanese imperialism had a progressive content and opposed sectarian tendencies that branded his stance as “social patriotism” and “a capitulation to Chiang Kai-shek.” He stressed, however, that in supporting the war the working class had to retain its political independence. Instead, in forging an alliance with the Kuomintang, the CCP subordinated the interests of the masses to the bourgeoisie—renouncing its own land reform program and explicitly abandoning the interests of workers so as not to offend the KMT landlords and capitalists. Following the Japanese defeat, the CCP, in line with Stalin’s policy of collaboration with bourgeois parties and governments in Europe and Asia, sought to continue its wartime alliance with the KMT.

8-5. Despite obvious signs that Chiang Kai-shek, with US backing, was preparing for war against the CCP, it was not until October 1947, as the Cold War was emerging, that Mao finally called for the overthrow of the KMT regime. Facing the prospect of military annihilation at the hands of a KMT offensive in Manchuria, the CCP revived its policy of land reform in order to exploit the widespread ferment among the peasantry. Chiang Kai-shek’s subsequent defeat had less to do with Mao’s supposed strategic genius, than the inherent weakness of the thoroughly corrupt and oppressive KMT regime, which lacked any significant political base, was besieged by financial crisis and confronted an immense revolutionary upheaval of the working class and peasantry. Mao’s armies defeated the KMT troops in Manchuria with the help of captured Japanese weapons handed over by the Soviet army and encountered no major military resistance as they swept south. The People’s Republic of China was

proclaimed in October 1949.

8-6. The CCP modelled its new regime on the “bloc of four classes” by including elements of the bourgeoisie who had not fled to Taiwan and by initially limiting the extent of land reform and the nationalisation of industry. However, such was the extent of the revolutionary movement and the popular expectations of the CCP, which many identified, falsely, with the heritage of the Russian Revolution, that the Stalinists were compelled to go further than they intended. Confronted with the danger of imperialist intervention as a result of the Korean War, the regime was forced to make concessions to workers and peasants as it mobilised the population for war. In rural areas, the expropriation of the landlord class was completed. As part of its “three anti” and “five anti” campaigns in 1951–52, the CCP targeted industrialists and merchants for their “corrupting influence” on the party and the state. In 1953, the first five-year plan was drawn up and subsequently most remaining private businesses were nationalised. None of the complex economic and social problems facing the government, however, could be resolved on the basis of the reactionary Stalinist theory of “Socialism in One Country.” The CCP created a series of disasters as it lurched from one pragmatic, nationalist policy to the next—including a devastating famine in the late 1950s produced by the “Great Leap Forward.”

8-7. The bureaucratic CCP regime acted at every point as a brake on the revolutionary movement of the masses, especially the working class. As Mao’s troops entered the cities and towns in 1949, the CCP imposed severe restrictions on any activity by workers. Strikes were suppressed by force with instances of workers being gunned down by troops or arrested and executed. The CCP’s organic hostility to the independent political mobilisation of the proletariat found its highest expression in the ruthless crackdown on Chinese Trotskyists, which began in 1949 and continued down to the mass detentions of 1952.

8-8. In the international arena, the CCP continued its alliance with the Soviet Union and relied heavily on Soviet experts and aid in the 1950s to expand the economy, particularly to develop heavy industry. The CCP’s economic management of nationalised industries was closely modelled on Stalinist bureaucratic planning in the Soviet Union. The Sino-Soviet split in 1962 reflected the competing national interests of the two Stalinist bureaucracies. The Soviet Union backed India against China in the 1962 Sino-Indian border war. The CCP, which was critical of Khrushchev’s exposure of Stalin’s crimes in his 1956 secret speech, never broke with the basic conceptions of Stalinism and continued to defend all of its betrayals. The CCP’s advocacy of the two-stage theory and an alliance with the bourgeoisie in backward countries produced catastrophes for the masses of Asia, including the bloody 1965–66 Indonesian coup.

To be continued

Footnotes:

13. *Writings of Leon Trotsky (1939–40)*, pp. 31–32.

14. Quoted in *Tomorrow is Ours*, p. 171.

15. *Leon Trotsky on China*, p. 528.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 525.



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