

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 4

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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9. The partition of India

9-1. In India, Congress, with the support of the Stalinist CPI, played the central role in aborting the mass anti-imperialist movement that emerged immediately after the war and in restabilising capitalist rule across South Asia. Terrified that a renewed Quit India movement would slip out of their control and increasingly apprehensive before a rising tide of working class and peasant struggles and growing unrest in the princely states, the Congress leadership moved as quickly as possible to reach a settlement with Britain, which had already recognised the unviability of clinging on to its Indian empire. In doing so, Congress jettisoned key aspects of its own program and sought a deal not only with the British but also with the communal parties—the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha—and with the zamindari landlords and the princes, who formed the conservative base of the colonial state.

9-2. The Muslim League, which represented the interests of the Muslim landlords and capitalists in India had put forward its demand for a separate Pakistan comprising the Muslim majority provinces in 1940. The Muslim elites, whom the British had organised and cultivated as a separate political force through the use of communal categories as a key instrument of their imperial rule, feared both their marginalisation within a unified Indian state and growing social unrest. The demand for a separate Muslim state was the means for the Muslim elite to stake its claim to a substantial share of political power in the anticipated post-war reorganisation of South Asia and to whip up communalism so as to divert and divide the increasingly restless masses. The Hindu Mahasabha, based among sections of the Hindu princes, landlords and big business, justified their own collaboration with the British in communal terms as the means of resisting Muslim “domination.” The Hindu Mahasabhaites railed against the Congress for “appeasing” the Muslims and argued that Muslims were alien to the “Hindu nation” and should be denied full citizenship rights. The only means of politically combating communalism was through the mobilisation of the workers and rural masses around their common social

needs. Organically hostile to such a strategy, as it threatened the fundamental interests of the Indian bourgeoisie as a whole, Congress increasingly adapted to communalism while containing and suppressing social struggles in which the masses implicitly challenged the communal divide. In the 1945–46 elections, the Congress flirted with an electoral pact with the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal and elsewhere welcomed Hindu Mahasabhaites into its ranks.

9-3. The post-war anti-imperialist upsurge initially took the form of opposition to the brutal repression of the Quit India movement and the trials of leaders of the Indian National Army (INA). INA leader Subhas Chandra Bose, a militant Congress leader, had opposed Gandhi, but sought to fight British rule not by turning to the working class, but to a rival imperialist power. He agreed to head the INA, formed from Indian soldiers who had been captured by the Japanese army, and to fight against the British under Japanese leadership. Despite their misguided aims, the INA leaders were widely regarded as heroes and patriots, and protests calling for clemency began to mushroom across India, in the process unifying Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. In November 1945 and again in February 1946, the BLPI was closely involved with student organisations in leading mass demonstrations in Calcutta against the INA trials. The protests were violently suppressed by police and troops, while the CPI joined hands with the Congress to disperse the crowds in the name of the struggle against indiscipline and disorder.

9-4. In February 1946, sections of the Indian navy in Bombay and Karachi mutinied over pay and conditions, while raising a series of radical political demands, including the release of all political prisoners, the withdrawal of British Indian troops from Indonesia and the slogan of “Quit India.” Their action triggered displays of solidarity and mutinies in other Indian military units and ultimately gave rise to mass worker actions and street fighting in Bombay. The Congress and Muslim League fully supported the British use of force in putting down the rebellion. Gandhi was especially virulent in his denunciations of the Royal Indian Navy mutineers and the cross-communal unity that characterised their struggle, saying he “would rather perish in the flames” than see the triumph of “the rabble” and declaring that a “combination between Hindus and Muslims and others for the purpose of violent action is unholy.” While the BLPI spearheaded calls for protests and a general strike in support of the mutineers, the Stalinist CPI denounced the “mass hysteria”, and sought to break up popular support for the mutiny. As on every other occasion that Congress reined in the mass movement, communalism erupted in the wake of the mutiny’s defeat. A Muslim League call for “direct action” in support of its “Pakistan” demand in August 1946 resulted in violent clashes with Hindus in Calcutta that left 6,000 dead and triggered Hindu

communal atrocities on Muslims in return.

9-5. The post-war upsurge also produced a wave of industrial action into which the BLPI intervened aggressively and made significant inroads. In June 1946 and again in March–June 1947, the BLPI, which had won the leadership of the Madras Labour Union (MLU), led major strikes involving the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Madras, one of the largest factories in India. The 1947 strike was a bitter three-month struggle during which mass rallies and a hartal involving more than 100,000 workers and small businesses took place. In June, the union was declared illegal, its funds seized and leaders arrested, but government attempts to reopen the B & C Mills failed. The MLU eventually called off the strike but forced management to grant significant concessions.

9-6. The BLPI took a principled stand against communal politics and the call for a separate Muslim Pakistan. A resolution at the 1944 BLPI conference declared: “The [Pakistan] slogan is politically reactionary and theoretically false. It is politically reactionary in that it constitutes an effort through an appeal to communal sentiments to divert rising discontent of the Moslem masses away from its true enemy, namely, British imperialism and its native allies, against the Hindus. It is theoretically false in that it proceeds from the indefensible contention that the Moslems in India constitute a Nation, which is declared to be oppressed (equally false) by a Hindu nation. There is no basis, whether of common historical tradition, language, culture, or race, or in respect of geographical and economic factors, for the arising of a distinct Moslem nationality. Religion (together, of course, with any common element of culture which that may entail) is the only unifying factor, and is clearly insufficient, on the basis of all historical experience, to produce any sentiment which can constitute a national consciousness.”[17]

9-7. Congress, however, was rapidly moving to a settlement with Britain and its princely and landlord allies. While the Congress leadership exploited its association with the Quit India upheaval to rally support, the radical turn that the Quit India movement had taken following the arrest of Gandhi and the other Congress leaders and the growth of post-war social struggles made it loathe to lead any popular challenge to British rule and determined to get its hands on the colonial state so as to stabilise bourgeois rule as quickly as possible. Consequently, the Congress leaders abandoned their demand for complete independence and accepted Dominion status with continuing ties to Britain. They also gave up their call for a Constituent Assembly based on universal suffrage and sought to prevent a radical challenge to the rule of the princes and landlordism. Most fundamentally, Congress abandoned its program for a unified, secular India and accepted and implemented the communal partition of the subcontinent. While the Muslim League pressed for the full inclusion of Bengal and Punjab in Pakistan, Congress advocated the communal division of these two provinces and had no compunction about working with rabid communalist elements, including S.P. Mookerjee, an ex-Hindu Mahasabha president and future founder of the Jana Sangh (later the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]). The Congress’ campaign to “save” the Hindus and Sikhs of the Punjab and Bengal from Muslim “domination” was a key factor in the unleashing of communal violence during the 1947 partition in which up to two million people perished and another 12–14 million were rendered refugees.

9-8. This betrayal was aided and abetted by the Stalinist CPI which subordinated the anti-colonial movement to the Indian bourgeoisie—firstly in the form of Congress, then, adapting to the rise of communalism in the final years of British rule, also to the Muslim League. The CPI lent political credibility to the Pakistan slogan, calling it the legitimate expression of Muslim self-determination, and sent its members into the

Muslim League to help it build a social base among the Muslim masses. Between 1945 and 1947, as the Congress and the Muslim League stoked a communal conflagration, the CPI issued futile calls for the rival bourgeois parties to come together and lead the national revolution.

9.9. Partition defined and defines the “freedom” and “independence” incarnated in bourgeois India and Pakistan. The communal pogroms that accompanied the birth of India and Pakistan, were only the most bloody and immediately apparent consequence of the abortion of the democratic revolution. The new states defended the wealth and property of the zamindars, princes and big business and retained the key institutions and laws of the British colonial state, adopting at most a handful of meagre, piecemeal reforms aimed at facilitating capitalist development. Six decades on, none of the burning democratic and social problems of the masses have been resolved. On the contrary they have grown ever more malignant as landlordism, caste oppression and other feudal vestiges have become ever more intertwined with capitalist exploitation.

9-10. Far from resolving the “communal problem”, partition has greatly compounded it by enshrining communal divisions in the state structure of South Asia. Addressing students in Calcutta following Gandhi’s murder in January 1948 by a follower of Hindutva ideologue V.D. Savarkar, BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva explained: “The tragedy of the partition flows particularly from the declared objects of its architects. This gruesome cutting up of the living body of India on the one hand and of two living ‘nationalities’ (the Punjabi and the Bengali nationalities) on the other was put forward as a *solution* of the communal problem on the one side and as a means of opening up the road to freedom on the other. Both pleas have proved false. Partition has proved in the one respect only a means for reforging chains for the imperialist enslavement of the masses ... In the other respect, it has proved but a means of beguiling two states to thoughts of mutual war as the only means of canalising internal communal feelings away from civil convulsions. The war by the way may yet come (if indeed, it has not already come in Kashmir and Junagadh). But the civil convulsions have come meanwhile in catastrophic fashion.”

9.11. De Silva’s warnings proved prophetic. Partition has given rise to a reactionary geo-political struggle between India and Pakistan that has resulted in three declared wars and countless war crises, squandered vital economic resources, and today threatens the people of South Asia with a nuclear conflagration. The first Indo-Pak war of 1947–48 resulted in a divided Kashmir that has cruelly split the Kashmiri people and has proven to be an intractable political problem within the framework of the communally-divided subcontinent. Incapable of resolving any of the myriad social tensions, the ruling elites in both countries have routinely resorted to communal demagoguery to deflect opposition at home. Partition has facilitated imperialist dominance of South Asia by frustrating rational economic development, including the use of water resources, and by providing a political mechanism for the US and other great powers to play one state and ruling elite against the other. Today South Asia is home to the world’s greatest concentration of poor and is the least economically integrated region in the world.

10. Formal independence in Sri Lanka

10-1. The British decision to grant self-government to Sri Lanka was not the product of any popular campaign waged by the Ceylon National

Congress. As a result of its pivotal strategic position in the Indian Ocean, the island became the headquarters for the Allied South East Asian Command during World War II. D.S Senanayake, as leader of the Board of Ministers, used the CNC's fulsome support for the war to haggle behind closed doors for post-war self-government. Senanayake and his colleagues never set their sights higher than Dominion status—that is, a junior partner to British imperialism in which London would still determine the island's overall foreign and defence policies. Senanayake's chief aim in the negotiations was to preserve the political domination of the Sinhala elites in any settlement. He did not object to Britain's overall control of foreign policy, but insisted that Sri Lanka had to be in charge of negotiations with India over the fate of the island's Tamil speaking plantation workers. When London established the Soulbury Commission in 1944 to map out a new constitution, Senanayake objected to its members holding discussions with the representatives of Tamils and Muslims. After the Soulbury Commission recommended limited self-government but delayed even Dominion status, Senanayake and the CNC leaders voted, in September 1945, to accept the report.

10-2. The BLPI leaders in Sri Lanka emerged from prison with considerable prestige as the only political figures who had opposed the war and campaigned for independence. However, the opportunist orientation elaborated by Philip Gunawardena and N.M. Perera during the war quickly manifested itself in an open split in the party. Gunawardena and Perera refused to accept the authority of the BLPI's regional committee in Sri Lanka and formed their own party, using the pre-war name—the LSSP. The party reverted to the LSSP's 1941 program for Ceylon and repudiated all documents and decisions made by the BLPI at and after its founding in 1942. Gunawardena and Perera opened the doors of the LSSP to ex-members and renegades and sought alliances with various bourgeois formations. The LSSP declared itself “for the Fourth International” but made no effort to seek affiliation. The nationalist orientation of the LSSP marked a fundamental break from Trotskyism and a return to the pre-war petty bourgeois radicalism of Samasamajism. In a 1947 statement entitled “The Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India: A Sectarian Dead-end,” Gunawardena made clear that he regarded the whole BLPI project and Trotskyism as nothing but a failed romantic adventure.

10-3. A resolution of the BLPI Central Committee in India expelling Gunawardena and Perera concluded that “the split is no accidental phenomenon but the clear manifestation of a non-proletarian tendency which has developed under the pressure of petty bourgeois forces.... The differences today clearly visible on the plane of organisation, are bound to develop on the plane of politics.” A tentative reunification in 1946 rapidly collapsed, underlining the fundamental character of the political differences.

10-4. The BLPI (Ceylon unit) and the LSSP played the leading role in the militant strike movements that emerged after the war, undermining the influence of the Communist Party that had used its position as wartime strikebreaker for the British to build a trade union apparatus. A general strike that erupted in August 1946 with a stoppage by clerical bank workers, spread to other sections of the working class over the next two months and compelled the British governor to accede to some of the workers' economic demands. The strikers also made the political demand for independence from British rule. The CNC ministers, who were deeply hostile to any concessions to the working class, violated the terms of the 1946 settlement provoking a second general strike in May–June 1947 that was met with violent repression. Thousands of government and private sector workers were victimised and lost their jobs. The government rammed through a Public Security Bill in the final days of the strike, giving sweeping powers to the police.

10-5. In June 1947, in the wake of the strike, the British government announced that the island would be granted full Dominion status—in line with India and Burma. As one historian put it: “At Whitehall, there was a clear understanding that Senanayake and the [CNC] moderates were facing increasing pressure from left-wing forces, apart from other critics, and that the immediate grant of Dominion status was now an urgent necessity as a means of ensuring their political survival.”[18] In the State Council elections later in 1947, the newly formed United National Party (UNP) established by Senanayake from the CNC and other bourgeois organisations won a plurality and formed a coalition government. The LSSP and BLPI each won a significant number of seats.

10-6. The LSSP's opportunist adaptation to the Sinhala bourgeoisie became immediately apparent in its manoeuvring to form a ruling parliamentary coalition under the leadership of the United National Party (UNP) politician S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. Bandaranaike had headed the Sinhala Maha Sabha, formed in 1919 to unite the majority Sinhalese on an explicitly racial and religious basis. In 1939, Colvin R. de Silva warned that the Sinhala Maha Sabha was “a dangerously reactionary body” that had the potential to become “a local variant of brown Fascism”[19] The LSSP's efforts to back a ruling coalition under Bandaranaike were the first steps in a dangerous trend to dress up Sinhala populism as a progressive alternative to the UNP. The LSSP's manoeuvring fell apart after the BLPI refused to participate in this reactionary charade.

10-7. The fundamental differences in the class orientation of the BLPI and LSSP were even starker over the issue of “independence” during the British handover on February 4, 1948. In a powerful statement entitled “Independence Real or Fake” issued on the day, BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva declared that the masses of Ceylon had nothing to rejoice about in the “independence” celebrations. “For the new status of their obtaining is not ‘independence’ but actually a refashioning of the chains of Ceylon's slavery to British imperialism. It is a continuation of British imperialism's method of exercising that rule ... Only fools would contend that there is ‘no change’ in Ceylon's ‘status’. There is a change. But the essence of this change lies not in any passage of Ceylon from colonial status to the status of independence, but in the change-over of British imperialism in Ceylon from methods of direct rule to methods of indirect rule.”[20] The BLPI not only voted against the government's motion on independence in the parliament; it organised a mass rally of around 50,000 on Galle Face Green in central Colombo in opposition to the official ceremonies. The LSSP, by contrast, declared “independence” a limited step forward, abstained on the vote in parliament and refused to attend the BLPI rally, which it denounced as “exhibitionism, ultra-leftism and adventurism” by “parlour Bolsheviks.”

10-8. The anti-democratic character of the “independence” settlement reached between British imperialism and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie became apparent in one of the first actions of the UNP government—its decision to pass laws that stripped the vast majority of Tamil-speaking plantation workers of their basic rights as citizens. The BLPI unequivocally opposed the anti-democratic legislation. In a speech in August 1948, Colvin R. de Silva declared that the assumption that “the state must be coeval with the nation and the nation with the race” was “an outmoded idea and an exploded philosophy.” He continued: “It is precisely under Fascism that the nation was to be made coeval with the race, and race the governing factor in the composition of the state ... If this Government approaches this question from the angle of the capitalist class, our party—we of the Fourth International—approach this question from the angle of the proletariat—the working class. That is to say, we approach it from a class angle independent of racial questions and above

racial questions. We are not ready as amongst the labouring population of this country to distinguish between man and man on the ground of his racial origin. We say a worker is, first and foremost, a worker.” Significantly, the Tamil elites of the North and East of the island, represented by the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), demonstrated their class allegiance, in opposition to the rights of the Tamil-speaking plantation workers, by voting for the bill. An ACTC minority opposed the legislation and split to form the Federal Party.

10-9. The BLPI’s far-sighted analysis of the character of the post-war independence settlements, based as it was on Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, has stood the test of time. While the United States supplanted Britain as the predominant imperialist power, and the existence of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China allowed some room for manoeuvre, the newly “independent” bourgeois states in Asia and Africa remained subordinate to imperialism and the post-war economic framework established by the United States. The ability of leaders such as India’s Nehru, Indonesia’s Sukarno, Egypt’s Nasser and Tanzania’s Nyerere to posture as “anti-imperialists” or “socialists” depended firstly on uncritical support from the Soviet or Chinese Stalinists, and secondly the policies of national economic regulation—import substitution, limited nationalisations and economic planning. The illusory character of independence was to become apparent with the end of the post-war boom and the collapse of the Bretton Woods system that had sustained national reformist policies. As in India and Sri Lanka, the national bourgeoisie in country after country has proved incapable of carrying out basic democratic tasks. The borders have remained those that were established by the former colonial rulers, whose economic interests have continued to be protected, cutting across pre-existing ethno-linguistic and cultural ties. Within the new states, the ruling cliques have invariably based themselves on the anti-democratic dominance of one ethnic, tribal or religious group at the expense of others.

To be continued

Footnotes:

17. Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India, “Resolution on Pakistan,” in *New International*, Volume 12, No. 10, December 1946, pp. 300-301, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol12/no10/blpi.htm>.

18. K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981) p. 460.

19. *Britain, World War 2 and the Sama Samajists* (Colombo: Young Socialist Publication, 1996) p. 63.

20. *Blows against the Empire*, p. 127.



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