

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 6

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. It appears in 12 parts.

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13. The LSSP's response to the Open Letter

13-1. The LSSP's refusal to support the SWP and the ICFI in opposing Pabloite opportunism was the turning point in its history and greatly accelerated its political degeneration. While critical of Pablo's pro-Stalinist orientation, the LSSP leadership strongly sympathised with the underlying liquidationist orientation that sanctioned its own adaptation to national reformist politics—a combination of parliamentarism and trade union syndicalism. Both parliament and the trade unions are hostile arenas that the revolutionary party is obliged to use to fight for its perspective but inevitably they place strong pressures on the party to adapt to reformist illusions in the working class. Although still espousing Trotskyism in word, the LSSP leaders increasingly came to measure their success in terms of the number of their parliamentary seats and the size of their trade unions. They viewed parliamentary combinations and strikes around limited economic demands, rather than the independent political mobilisation of the working class, as the path to socialism.

13-2. The consequences of the LSSP's opportunist orientation had already been demonstrated in the events of August 1953—a major crisis for bourgeois rule on the island. In the 1952 general election, the UNP had won a convincing majority, the unified LSSP had lost seats and a new party—the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) formed by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in 1951 made its first modest showing. Within a year, however, the UNP government all but collapsed under the impact of a semi-insurrectionary movement of the working class and peasantry provoked by government measures to stem the economic crisis created by the end of the Korean War. The LSSP, supported by the Communist Party, the VLSSP and the Federal Party, called a one-day hartal—a general strike and closure of businesses—on August 12 to protest against price rises. The response took all of the parties, including the LSSP, by surprise. The strike brought Colombo to a halt and protests spread through the rural areas of the south and west. In many areas protesters defied police violence, blocked roads and tore up railway tracks. A panicked UNP

government met on a British warship in Colombo harbour, declared a state of emergency, called out the military, sealed the offices and press of working-class parties and imposed a curfew. Nine people were shot dead by police in protests that continued for two more days.

13-3. Subsequent LSSP mythology has seized on the 1953 hartal to demonstrate the party's revolutionary character. In reality, the LSSP provided no leadership to the mass movement. It failed to take such elementary steps as to issue a call for action committees in factories, suburbs and villages to prosecute the campaign and for workers defence guards against state repression. Instead the LSSP leaders joined the CP and VLSSP in calling for an end to the hartal, leaving those who continued to protest to face state violence alone. In a lengthy article, Colvin R. de Silva declared the hartal to be a new stage of the class struggle that bore “the imprint of the worker-peasant alliance.” But he concluded that the fight was now “to compel the UNP government to resign and hold a fresh general election.” The LSSP had all along viewed the hartal as nothing more than an adjunct to its parliamentary manoeuvring. As a result Bandaranaike was able to capitalise on the mass opposition sentiment and to gain influence, particularly among the Sinhala rural masses disillusioned by the lack of LSSP leadership. Bandaranaike's political rise was further cemented when the LSSP backed his no-confidence motion in the UNP government. Shocked by the scope of the hartal, significant sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite swung their support behind the SLFP as an alternate means for propping up capitalist rule. While he had opposed the protests and his SLFP did not participate, the hartal was the making of Bandaranaike as a pivotal figure for the Sri Lankan ruling class.

13-4. In the wake of the Hartal, the clamour inside the LSSP for “left unity” with the Stalinist CP and VLSSP intensified. After the 1952 election, a tendency had emerged that blamed the party's losses on its failure to reach a no-contest pact with the CP and VLSSP, which had demanded the LSSP drop its criticism of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and China. Encouraged by Pablo's pro-Stalinist line at the Third Congress, the “unity” faction put forward an amendment at the LSSP congress in October 1953 calling for the party to be “friendly unconditionally” to the “socialist countries”. After the amendment was defeated, the pro-Stalinist grouping broke away, its adherents joining either the CP or VLSSP.

13-5. It was in this context that the LSSP leadership responded to the Open Letter. Its rejection of Cannon's appeal and refusal to join the International Committee were all the more politically criminal as the former BLPI leaders were well aware of the pro-Stalinist character of

Pablo's revisions. Moreover, it had just experienced firsthand the impact of Pabloism in its own ranks. But the LSSP objected in legalistic terms to the manner in which the Open Letter was issued and refused to take a political stand. Cannon wrote to Leslie Goonewardene, noting that the LSSP had expelled its own pro-Stalinist tendency, then pointedly added: "As internationalists, it is obligatory that we take the same attitude toward open or covert manifestations of Stalinist conciliationism *in other parties*, and *in the international movement generally*.[29]

13-6. Belatedly, the LSSP Central Committee passed a resolution in April 1954 recognising the far-reaching consequences of Pablo's claim that Stalinist parties could be pushed onto the revolutionary road by mass pressure. "This concept not only leads to a fundamental revision of the positions of Trotskyism in regard to Stalinism but also denies to the Trotskyist movement all justification for its continued independent existence," it declared. In practice, however, the LSSP sought to conciliate and manoeuvre to preserve "unity" with the Pabloites, at the expense of political clarification and principle, only compounding the difficulties facing the SWP and ICFI. The LSSP leaders ultimately capitulated to Pabloism. They attended the Pabloite Fourth Congress later in 1954, thus lending it legitimacy, supported its resolutions with minor amendments and remained with the Pabloite International Secretariat. It was the start of a thoroughly opportunist relationship that was to have disastrous consequences for the working class. The LSSP could claim Trotskyist credentials for its reformist politics in the national arena, while the International Secretariat could boast of having "a mass Trotskyist party" in Asia. The LSSP's support for Pabloism was a terrible blow against Trotskyism and thus the working class, particularly in Asia. If the LSSP, or a section of it, had taken a principled stand, it would have immensely strengthened the International Committee, advanced its work throughout the region, especially in India, and acted as a powerful antidote to the pernicious influence of Maoism.

14. The LSSP's political backsliding

14-1. The LSSP degenerated rapidly after 1953, aided and abetted at every stage by the Pabloite International Secretariat. In the space of just over a decade, the party abandoned any struggle for Trotskyism, embraced Sinhala communalism and betrayed the working class by entering a bourgeois SLFP-led coalition government in 1964, thereby assuming political responsibility for the management of the capitalist state. The LSSP's degeneration was intimately bound up at every step with its political adaptation to Bandaranaike and the SLFP—that is, to the communal politics of Sinhala populism that, in the early stages at least, were laced with anti-imperialist and socialistic demagoguery. The inability of the LSSP to take a firm, principled stand against the SLFP was connected to its reversion to the petty-bourgeois radical traditions of Samasamajism. It was no longer a politically homogeneous party. Layers of former BLPI members were still rooted in the traditions of proletarian internationalism that had been graphically demonstrated in the huge rally in 1948 against the fraud of the new "independent" state. However, the increasingly nationalist orientation was determined by party's rightwing led by N.M. Perera, to which ex-BLPI figures such Colvin R. de Silva and Leslie Goonewardene acquiesced. Step by step, Perera overcame internal resistance to an open embrace of the SLFP and its Sinhala populism.

14-2. In preparing for the 1956 election, Bandaranaike sought to

mobilise layers of the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie—small businessmen, Buddhist monks and ayurvedic doctors—aggrieved by their marginalisation under the British colonial administration. Drawing on the demagoguery of the earlier Buddhist revivalist movement, Bandaranaike argued that the Sinhalese were "a unique race" that had to be accorded the dominant position in the country's affairs. In 1955, the SLFP abandoned its demand that both Sinhala and Tamil replace English as the country's official language. Instead it adopted a "Sinhala only" policy that would make Sinhala the sole official language—that is, in the courts, public sector employment, the education system and all official matters. Bandaranaike also promised to accord Buddhism a special official standing. By proposing to make Sinhala supremacism the guiding principle of state policy, the SLFP relegated ethnic Tamils and Tamil-speaking Muslims to a second-class status. To provide his Sinhala populism with socialist and anti-imperialist window-dressing, Bandaranaike brought Philip Gunawardena's VLSSP into his Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) or People's United Front for the 1956 election.

14-3. The LSSP opposed the Sinhala-only policy and defended the democratic rights of the Tamil minority despite violent attacks by Sinhala racists. The arguments used by LSSP leaders, however, betrayed a marked shift from the BLPI's proletarian internationalism. The LSSP not only accepted the legitimacy of the Sri Lankan state but also argued that the Sinhala-only policy would undermine the nation. Their opposition was based on defending the unity of the nation, not on fighting for the unity of the working class. Speaking in parliament in October 1955, N.M. Perera warned: "We shall have a perpetual division of the country, we shall never get a united Ceylon, and we shall have a tremendous amount of bloodshed which will lead us nowhere, and, in the end, this country will either become a colony or a plaything of interested big powers." [30] It was not a stand taken on principle. Despite Bandaranaike's "Sinhala-only" policy, the LSSP struck an electoral "no-contest" pact with the SLFP—thus giving credence to this bourgeois party as a progressive alternative to the UNP. After the SLFP won a sweeping victory, the LSSP adopted a stance of "responsive co-operation" towards the new Bandaranaike government and in 1956 and 1957 voted for the Throne Speech outlining government policy for the year. It only became critical of Bandaranaike with the emergence of strikes from late 1957.

14-4. The thrust of the new SLFP-led government was the assertion of Sinhala dominance in all spheres, provoking protests by Tamils, and vicious counter-pogroms by Sinhala extremists who regarded any attempt on Bandaranaike's part to reach a compromise with the Tamil elites as a betrayal. The limited nationalisations carried out by his government expanded the role of the state and thus job opportunities for the Sinhalese majority. The extension of public education and health was aimed at consolidating a base among the party's Sinhala rural constituency. The government, however, was incapable of meeting the basic needs of workers and the rural masses. This led to strikes and protests. The anti-working class character of the SLFP-led government soon became apparent in its strengthening of the Public Security Act in March 1958 followed shortly after by the imposition of a 10-month state of emergency. Having exploited the politics of Sinhala communalism to develop a rural base for the SLFP and to divide the working class, Bandaranaike fell victim to his own creation. He was assassinated by a Buddhist extremist in September 1959. The rightwing of his own party, who feared that the government was incapable of containing a growing working class movement, was also implicated. The same rightwing had already insisted on the dismissal of Philip Gunawardena as government minister. Gunawardena appropriated the name of MEP for his own new Sinhala racist party.

14-5. The year 1960 marked a further shift to the right by the LSSP. In the first of two elections in March, the LSSP abandoned any semblance of revolutionary Marxism and embraced the parliamentary road to socialism. Declaring the UNP and SLFP to be completely discredited, the party campaigned for “a Samasamajist government”—through parliament. It significantly watered down its previous stance on the language issue—dropping its call for parity between Sinhala and Tamil—and on citizenship—now declaring the issue could be negotiated between the Sri Lankan and Indian governments, without any reference to plantation workers. The Pabloite International Secretariat enthusiastically endorsed the LSSP’s parliamentary cretinism and adaptation to communal politics, describing its election campaign as “a decisive struggle for power”.

14-6. Far from winning office, the LSSP gained fewer seats than in the 1956 election, provoking a crisis in the party. N.M. Perera took the opportunity to propose for the first time that the party prepare to enter a capitalist government with the SLFP. His resolution was passed at a party congress in May 1960, but was thwarted by the election of a Central Committee in which his rightwing was in a minority. Nevertheless, when the short-lived UNP government collapsed and new elections took place in July 1960, the LSSP reached a no-contest agreement with the SLFP. With the election of a new SLFP government led by Bandaranaike’s widow, the LSSP supported its overall policies by voting for its first Throne Speech and its first budget.

14-7. Only now did the Pabloite International Secretariat (IS) start to raise tepid criticisms. It had not objected to the LSSP’s previous no-contest pact and “responsive cooperation” with the SLFP in 1956. The only IS criticism of the LSSP’s parliamentary road to socialism in the March 1960 election was that it had not been successful and a “profound examination” was needed to ascertain the reasons for the electoral defeat. However, with N.M. Perera proposing to enter a capitalist government, the IS began a political cover up for its own gross opportunism. It belatedly declared that “the no-contest agreement” carried the danger of “creating illusions about the nature of the SLFP among the great masses.” The Sixth World Congress condemned the LSSP’s support for the Throne Speech and government budget. But the IS did not rule out giving “critical support to a non-working class government (whether middle class or capitalist) in a colonial or semi-colonial country” and, in so doing endorsed, the LSSP’s rightward drift and provided the rationalisation for its continuing opportunism.

14-8. Pabloism also sanctioned the LSSP’s accommodation to the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and China. In 1957, in the wake of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, an LSSP delegation including Edmund Samarakkody and Colvin R. de Silva visited Moscow as official guests and made no mention of the Soviet army’s suppression of Hungarian workers. In the same year, the LSSP newspaper published an editorial entitled “Tribute to Chou En-lai” and hailed the Chinese foreign minister and his fellow Stalinists for “the tremendous sacrifices made by these men who led the Chinese Revolution to victory.” The American Socialist Workers Party criticised the LSSP in an editorial that declared, “Chou En Lai and the Chinese Communist Party did not lead ‘the Chinese Communist Party to victory,’ nor can they legitimately be identified with that victory.” It called on the upcoming LSSP delegation to China to strongly demand the release of the Chinese Trotskyists, which the LSSP leaders flatly refused to do.

15. The SWP reunification

15-1. In 1953, SWP leader James P. Cannon had concluded his Open Letter by declaring: “The lines of cleavage between Pablo’s revisionism and orthodox Trotskyism are so deep that no compromise is possible politically or organisationally.”[31] Quite quickly, however, the SWP began to soften its opposition to Pabloism. As early as 1957, Cannon responded positively to a letter from Leslie Goonewardene sounding out the prospects of the SWP’s unification with the International Secretariat. The shift was part of the SWP’s increasing adaptation to American middle-class radical circles under the pressure of the post-war boom.

15-2. In fact, the gulf between orthodox Trotskyism and Pabloism had widened, but the SWP was adopting opportunist positions similar to those of the IS. By late 1960, the SWP, now under the leadership of Joseph Hansen, was glorifying the Cuban regime, established by Fidel Castro and his petty-bourgeois guerrilla movement, as a “workers’ state”. Based on crude empiricism, the SWP asserted that the proletarian nature of the Cuban state was determined by Castro’s nationalisation of the largely agricultural economy, ignoring its open hostility to any independent action by the working class and the lack of any organs of workers’ power. Moreover, as Castro turned to the Soviet Union for assistance against US imperialism and fused his July 26th Movement with the Cuban Stalinists, the SWP insisted that the Castroites were becoming Marxists in the course of the revolution. The SWP’s veneration of “the first victorious socialist revolution in the Americas”, which “raised the entire colonial revolutionary process to a new plateau of achievement” and gave “fresh confirmation of the correctness of the theory of permanent revolution”, became the touchstone for its reunification with the Pabloites.

15-3. Between 1961 and 1963, the British Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) led a determined struggle within the International Committee against the SWP’s opportunism. The SLL rejected the SWP’s contention that petty bourgeois leaderships could be forced by “the logic of the revolution itself” to lead the working class to power and emphasised that the central task confronting the Fourth International remained the resolution of the crisis of proletarian leadership through the construction of Bolshevik-type parties. After reviewing the struggle against revisionism, the SLL concluded in 1961: “It is time to draw to a close the period in which Pabloite revisionism was regarded as a trend within Trotskyism.”

15-4. In relation to Cuba, the SWP employed Pablo’s and Mandel’s objectivist method. In its July 1962 document, “Trotskyism Betrayed: The SWP accepts the political method of Pabloite revisionism,” the SLL National Committee declared: “In our communications with the SWP we provoked a strong reaction by daring to suggest that talk about ‘confirming the permanent revolution’ without the revolutionary parties was nonsense. In practice, however, both the Pabloites and the SWP find themselves prostrate before the petty-bourgeois nationalist leaders in Cuba and Algeria. Our view of this question is not opposed to that of the SWP simply in terms of who can best explain a series of events. It is a question rather of the actual policy and program of Trotskyist leadership in these backward countries. The theory of permanent revolution is, like all Marxist theory, a guide to action; analysis becomes the pointer to the need to organise an independent and determined working class and its allies in the peasantry for their own soviet power. ‘Confirming the permanent revolution’ is not an accolade to be conferred by Marxists on approved nationalist leaders but a task for which Marxists themselves have the responsibility.”[32]

15-5. Moreover, the SLL insisted that the so-called successes proclaimed by the SWP in Cuba and Algeria had to be assessed as part of

an overall balance sheet of Stalinism and petty bourgeois radicalism in mass struggles in backward capitalist countries. “Besides Cuba and Algeria—and in order to understand both of these—the experience of Iraq, Iran, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Bolivia, Indo-China, and many other countries must be taken into account. What would emerge from such a historical analysis is the true role played by those leaders of the working class who have proceeded from the theory of ‘two stages’. Stalinism, far from being ‘forced to play a progressive role’, has in fact disarmed and betrayed the advanced workers in every one of these countries and has enabled a bourgeois government to establish temporary stabilisation—which is all imperialism can hope for at the present stage. It is in this sense and this sense only that the ‘theory of Permanent Revolution has been confirmed’.”[33]

15-6. The SLL also opposed the SWP’s claim that the 1962 Evian agreement for Algerian “independence” between the French government and Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN) leadership represented “a major victory for the Algerian people, for the Arab and colonial revolution”. The SLL defended the Fourth International’s assessment—clearly elaborated by the BLPI in relation to India and Sri Lanka—of such formal post-war independence agreements under which the national bourgeoisie took on the role of safeguarding imperialist interests. The SLL explained: “The Algerian petty bourgeoisie seeks to fill the place vacated by French colonialism, while continuing to be a loyal guarantor of the fundamental interests of French capital in North Africa. We see the Evian agreements as the expression of that willingness, in which the FLN leaders remain true to their nature.”[34]

15-7. Without any discussion of the theoretical and political issues that had led to the 1953 split, the SWP, and groups in many Latin American countries that had hitherto been affiliated to the ICFI and traditionally looked to the US Trotskyists for leadership, formally reunified with the Pabloites at their Seventh Congress in Rome in June 1963. In what was a complete rejection of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, the main resolution of the Pabloite “World Congress” concluded from the Cuban revolution that “the weakness of the enemy in the backward countries has opened the possibility of coming to power with a blunted instrument”—that is, without a Leninist party fighting for the independent mobilisation of the working class. The Pabloites’ glorification of Castro and guerrilla “armed struggle” was to prove a disastrous dead-end in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia and across Latin America, serving to isolate revolutionary elements from the working class and contributing to historic defeats. The LSSP leaders, who were investing the capitalist SLFP with the functions of “a blunted instrument” in Sri Lanka, fully supported the reunification and the formation of the new United Secretariat. In turn, the SWP lauded the LSSP as a mass Trotskyist party.

To be continued

Footnotes:

29. Emphasis in the original; *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Two (London: New Park 1974), p. 89.

30. *Blows against the Empire*, p. 169.

31. *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume One, p. 312.

32. *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Three (London: New Park, 1974), p. 244.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 248.



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