

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 10

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.

Part 1 | Part 2 | Part 3 | Part 4 | Part 5 | Part 6 | Part 7 | Part 8 | Part 9
Part 10 | Part 11 | Part 12

23. The 1985–1986 split with the WRP

23-1. The Tenth Congress of the ICFI in January 1985 was dominated by two interrelated phenomena: first, a devastating political crisis inside the WRP and second, the suppression of fundamental political differences that had been raised by the Workers League of the United States over the preceding three years. Neither was discussed. As the WRP was abandoning its previous principled struggle against Pabloism, the Workers League had been moving in the opposite direction. In 1974, following the desertion of national secretary Tim Wohlforth, the Workers League made a deliberate turn to the working class and placed the fight against Pabloite opportunism at the centre of the party's work. The Workers League played the leading role in the "Security and the Fourth International" investigation, which was bitterly opposed by all Pabloite groups. This investigation exposed the network of Stalinist agents inside the Trotskyist movement who had been responsible for Trotsky's murder. It provided conclusive evidence that SWP leader Joseph Hansen had been a Stalinist, then FBI, agent.

23-2. In 1982, Workers League National Secretary David North presented detailed criticisms of Gerry Healy's *Studies in Dialectical Materialism*, demonstrating that it represented an abandonment of the dialectical and historical materialism of Marx. North pointed out that "in the name of the struggle for dialectical materialism and against propagandism", there had been a steady drift away from the struggle for Trotskyism, particularly the Theory of Permanent Revolution. The WRP leadership responded by threatening to sever relations with the Workers League unless North withdrew his criticisms. In a letter to WRP General Secretary Mike Banda in January 1984, North made a further analysis of the WRP's positions, particularly in relation to the Middle East, and stated that the Workers League was "deeply troubled by the growing signs of a political drift towards positions quite similar—both in conclusions and methodology—to those which we have historically associated with

Pabloism." In February 1984, North delivered a political report to the ICFI that began by analysing the significance of the American SWP's unambiguous renunciation of the Theory of Permanent Revolution in December 1982. He highlighted the WRP's adaptation not only to bourgeois regimes in the Middle East but to Labour lefts and the trade union bureaucracy in Britain. Again the WRP threatened to split with the Workers League and blocked any discussion. The RCL was not represented at the meeting and was not informed about the discussion.

23-3. Following the defeat of the protracted British miners' strike in 1985, a crisis exploded inside the WRP that rapidly led to its break from the ICFI and political disintegration. Keerthi Balasuriya travelled to Britain and learned for the first time of David North's criticisms of the WRP in October 1985. Along with representatives of the Australian SLL and German BSA, he expressed his agreement with North's analysis. On October 25, 1985, the ICFI issued two statements: on the expulsion of Gerry Healy and on the crisis in the British section. The latter statement identified the source of the political crisis in the "prolonged drift of the WRP leadership away from the strategic task of building the world party of socialist revolution towards an increasingly nationalist perspective and practice." The ICFI resolved that the WRP register its members on the explicit recognition of the political authority of ICFI and the subordination of the British section to its decisions.

23-4. On December 16, 1985, the ICFI received the report of its control commission on the WRP's financial dealings. In response to the findings, it passed a resolution declaring that the WRP had carried out a historic betrayal of the ICFI and the international working class, which "consisted of the complete abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution, resulting in the pursuit of unprincipled relations with sections of the colonial bourgeoisie in return for money." The ICFI resolved to suspend the WRP pending an emergency ICFI Congress following the 8th Congress of the WRP. A further resolution adopted the following day reaffirmed the essential programmatic foundations of the ICFI and the historic correctness of the struggle against Pabloism. The suspension of the WRP was decisive in reasserting the political authority of the ICFI and the central importance of the programmatic principles of the Trotskyist movement. The decision made clear that there would be no compromise on these fundamental issues and established a principled basis for the resolution of the crisis within the WRP. Of the WRP delegates, only David Hyland, who led a minority inside the WRP that was to later form the British section of the ICFI, voted for the resolutions. The opposition of the Banda-Slaughter faction demonstrated that, while they had fallen out with Healy, they shared the same underlying opportunist and national perspective.

24. After the split with the WRP

23-5. In a letter to David North, Slaughter opposed the subordination of the WRP to the ICFI asserting that internationalism consisted of “laying down class lines and fighting them through.” In its reply, the Workers League Political Committee asked: “But by what process are these ‘class lines’ determined? Does it require the existence of the Fourth International?... The International Committee of the Fourth International is the historical embodiment of the ‘whole programmatic base of Trotskyism and the Marxism of Marx and Lenin.’ The subordination of national sections to the IC is the organised expression of their agreement with the defence of that program. Those parties which uphold Trotskyism as the contemporary development of Marxist principles and program are organised in the Fourth International and accept the authority of the International Committee. To base one’s definition of internationalism on the separation of the program from its organisational expression is to adopt the standpoint of all those revisionist and centrist opponents of Trotskyism who deny the continuity of Marxism, embodied in the ICFI, in order to retain freedom of action within their theatre of operations.”[54]

23-6. The WRP split from the ICFI at its rump congress on February 8, 1986 on the basis of Banda’s document “27 Reasons Why the International Committee Should be Buried Forthwith and the Fourth International be Built” which renounced the entire struggle of the IC against Pabloism. All supporters of the IC were excluded from the congress. Within months, Banda had repudiated Trotskyism, proclaimed capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union to be impossible and hailed Stalin as the necessary Bonapartist leader who had defended the gains of the October Revolution. The ICFI concluded one year later in an exhaustive study of all those who split with the IC in 1985–86: “The main orientation of all the anti-ICFI tendencies is towards an out and out capitulation to Stalinism and Social Democracy, the repudiation of the political independence of the working class, and ever more pronounced orientation toward participation in popular front alliances with sections of the bourgeoisie.”[55]

23-7. The split in the International Committee was a reflection of profound changes in the economic base and political superstructure of world capitalism. The global integration of productive processes and the exploitation of cheap labour platforms in Asia that had begun in the late 1970s had undermined the programs of national economic regulation on which the social democratic, Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist leaderships had rested in the post-war period. Pabloism emerged within the Fourth International as an opportunist adaptation to the dominance of these bureaucratic apparatuses over the working class. The British SLL defended the program of Trotskyism but faced growing isolation, particularly after the SWP’s reunification in 1963 with the Pabloites and the split with the OCI in 1971. The SLL’s increasingly nationalist orientation began to diverge from that of the new IC sections formed in the 1960s and early 1970s that based themselves on the lessons of the splits of 1953 and 1961–63. This process accelerated with the foundation of the WRP. As it abandoned the struggle against Pabloism on which its political authority within the IC rested, the WRP blocked political discussion inside the international movement and responded to criticism with organisational threats and political provocations. The victory of the Trotskyists within the IC and the restoration of Trotskyism to the centre of its work marked a profound shift in class relations that was to become more evident with the decay and disintegration of the old bureaucratic organisations of the working class and the rapid move to the right of all the Pabloite groupings.

24-1. As the ICFI explained: “The 1985–86 split is, without any question, a historical milestone in the development of the Fourth International. It is the culmination of the protracted struggle that has been waged by the Trotskyist movement against Pabloite opportunism since the founding of the International Committee in 1953. The long period of disunity and confusion created by Pabloite opportunism is coming to a close. The conditions have been created for the consolidation of all genuine Trotskyists, that is, revolutionary Marxists, from all over the world under the banner of the International Committee.”[56]

24-2. The split with the WRP led to an unprecedented development of international collaboration between sections of the ICFI and a renaissance of Marxism within the international movement. The IC produced a lengthy analysis of the degeneration of the WRP entitled *How the Workers Revolution Party Betrayed Trotskyism 1973–1985* that has never been challenged, let alone refuted, by any of the WRP renegades. David North replied to Banda’s anti-Trotskyist diatribe in his book *The Heritage We Defend* that clarified crucial aspects of the Fourth International’s history and program. These works plus innumerable other articles and statements became the basis for the education of the cadre of the movement and for overcoming the impact of the WRP’s political degeneration on the sections of the IC.

24-3. The split transformed the work of the RCL. The documents of the ICFI and the pivotal issues that they raised were thoroughly discussed in the leadership and membership of the party, which overwhelmingly supported the IC. Over the next two years, Keerthi Balasuriya concentrated on the programmatic work of the ICFI, especially in relation to the Theory of Permanent Revolution. Balasuriya and David North wrote the editorial of the *Fourth International* in March 1987 (Volume 14, No. 1) that provided a detailed exposure of Banda’s renunciation of Permanent Revolution going back to his adulation of Mao and Ho Chi Minh in the late 1960s. The same issue published the correspondence between Balasuriya and the SLL leaders on the Bangladesh liberation struggle. The RCL, in conjunction with the ICFI, also resumed and expanded its political work in India.

24-4. The split created the conditions for an important discussion of the national question that confronted the RCL directly in the form of the escalating civil war against the LTTE. In 1986, Balasuriya wrote a lengthy article entitled “The Tamil Struggle and the Treachery of Healy, Banda and Slaughter” that exposed the WRP’s opportunist veering from complete indifference to the Tamil struggle and backing for the Sri Lankan nation-state in the early 1970s to its uncritical support for the LTTE from 1979 onwards. “As this examination of the historical record of Healy, Banda and Slaughter on the Tamil national struggle makes clear, this pack of scoundrels masquerading as Trotskyists have systematically betrayed the Tamil and Sinhalese workers alike. Above all, they consciously worked, even though unsuccessfully, to destroy the only party in Sri Lanka which fought for the perspective of the theory of permanent revolution—the RCL,” he concluded.

24-5. The aftermath of the split coincided with an acute political crisis for the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. The UNP government confronted serious military setbacks in the North and growing social unrest in the South fuelled by an economic downturn and the impact of its pro-market policies. President J.R. Jayewardene sought to buy time by agreeing to India’s appeals for negotiations with the various armed Tamil groups. In

the wake of failed talks in the Bhutanese capital of Thimpu in 1985, Jayewardene initiated All-Party Round Table talks in Colombo in 1986 to enlist the assistance of the opposition political parties for “a common program for peace.” The petty-bourgeois radicals of the NSSP joined the LSSP, CP and the Sri Lanka Mahajana Party (SLMP)—a leftist grouping of former SLFP parliamentarians headed by Bandaranaike’s daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga—in talks with the UNP government. All of them bear political responsibility for the outcome—the signing of the Indo-Lanka Accord in July 1987 by Jayewardene and Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to send Indian troops to the northern and eastern provinces. In the guise of implementing a peace deal, the real purpose of the military mission was to disarm the Tamil guerrillas and suppress any political opposition to the terms of the agreement. The SLFP refused to take part in the government’s Round Table talks and, along with the JVP, launched a chauvinist campaign against any peace deal.

24-6. The RCL was the only party to oppose the Round Table talks and the Indo-Lanka Accord from the standpoint of proletarian internationalism—calling for the unity of the working class in Sri Lanka and India against the military intervention. The party warned that the dispatch of troops stemmed from the crises facing the Jayewardene and Gandhi governments, was directed against the working class and rural masses, and was a trap for the Tamil people. It was no accident that amid the Round Table talks in June 1986, the police arrested three RCL members—Wije Dias, Brutan Perera and Ruman Perera—for campaigning for a meeting to defend public education and held them for six weeks. Shortly after his release, Brutan Perera was detained again, along with RCL youth leader Viran Peiris. They were released only after an extensive international campaign involving all sections of the ICFI. This attempt to intimidate and silence the RCL was clearly provoked by the UNP’s sensitivity to any criticism of its “peace” machinations.

24-7. The Indo-Lankan Accord was a devastating exposure of all the armed Tamil groups, including the LTTE, that placed their faith in the Indian government and army to guarantee the democratic rights of Tamils. All along their perspective had been to gain the support of the Indian bourgeoisie for the creation of a separate capitalist Eelam. The governments of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, however, had not the slightest concern about Tamil democratic rights; they cynically sought to use the Tamil struggle to further New Delhi’s ambitions to become the predominant regional power. In 1987, India intervened militarily to suppress a Tamil insurgency it had encouraged in order to pressure Colombo but that threatened to provoke unrest in India and undermine the reactionary post-war state system in South Asia. Those outfits most closely tied to New Delhi, including the EPRLF, TELO and PLOTE, functioned as auxiliaries to India’s army of occupation with EPRLF leader Vardadaraja Perumal becoming provincial chief minister for the merged North and East. As it sought to establish its unchallenged control, the Indian army resorted to widespread arrests, rape, torture and extra-judicial murders that alienated Tamils and brought it into conflict with the LTTE. However, even as its fighters were being hunted down, the LTTE continued to proclaim its faith in India and Rajiv Gandhi.

24-8. The Indo-Lanka Accord produced a political crisis in the ranks of Tamil organisations in Sri Lanka and the broader international diaspora. Keerthi Balasuriya addressed several well-attended meetings in Europe of young Tamil militants who were looking for answers to the perfidy of their organisations. The most farsighted elements drew the conclusion that it was only on the basis of the ICFI’s perspective and an orientation to the working class that the oppression of Tamils could be ended. They joined the ICFI and have made a powerful contribution to its work in Europe and South Asia.

25. The United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam

25-1. In November 1987, the ICFI published a comprehensive statement entitled “The Situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the Revolutionary Communist League” that for the first time raised the slogan of a United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam. The statement, based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution, unambiguously insisted that the democratic rights of Tamils would only be realised through the struggle of the working class for socialism. In other words, national self-determination, like other democratic tasks, could not be resolved by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois movements no matter how courageous or militant. The slogan clearly demarcated the RCL’s orientation in fighting to mobilise the working class—Sinhala and Tamil—to defend basic democratic rights through the struggle for socialism from any tendency to reduce the party to the role of cheerleader and political adviser to the Tamil national movement—as the WRP had done.

25-2. As the ICFI statement explained, none of the so-called independent states established after World War II had met the democratic aspirations or basic material needs of the masses. “Invariably, imperialist-sanctioned ‘independence’ has meant the setting up of bastard states whose very foundations have been built upon a fatal compromise of democratic principles. In this process, the national bourgeoisie has functioned not as the liberator of the oppressed masses, but as a junior partner in imperialist plunder. The type of state created in this process has been nothing more than a prison ground for putrefying capitalism, upon which the progressive development of the productive forces has been impossible ... Arising out of such conditions, with the joyous approval of the bourgeoisie, are the horrors of intercommunal warfare. This state of affairs cannot be altered as long as bourgeois rule prevails. The post-independence history of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma—in fact, of every former colonial country in the world—decisively proves that the bourgeoisie cannot establish genuine national unification and political independence.”[57]

25-3. Consequently, these bourgeois democratic tasks fall to the proletariat. While upholding the right to self-determination, the ICFI statement insisted that national self-determination could only be achieved through the strategy of socialist revolution and was therefore subordinate to it. “It [the working class] is the only social force that can realise the right of nations to self-determination. However, it does this not as an appendage to the national bourgeoisie, but rather as its implacable enemy. It fights for self-determination with its own weapons and on the basis of its own program, rallying behind it all the oppressed masses of the villages and countryside. Self-determination is achieved as a by-product of the socialist revolution led by the proletariat which, having established its dictatorship, guarantees to all oppressed people their legitimate democratic rights. As the framework for the genuine equality of nations, it proposes the creation of a voluntarily united socialist federation. While believing that the voluntary amalgamation of all oppressed nations offers the best opportunity for economic and cultural progress, the proletarian dictatorship pledges that those nations which wish to secede shall have the right to do so. This is the essential content of the program advanced by the Revolutionary Communist League for a United Socialist States of Tamil Eelam and Sri Lanka.”[58]

25-4. The ICFI statement also began the process of reassessing the character of the various national liberation movements in the light of the LTTE's political capitulation to the Indian bourgeoisie. In contrast to the broad anti-colonial movements before and after World War II that drew in the masses across ethnicity, language, religion and caste, organisations such as the LTTE were based on national exclusivity. This, as Lenin had warned, was the outlook of the national bourgeoisie which conceived self-determination solely in terms of establishing its own national privileges and the conditions for the exploitation of workers and peasants within its own "independent" state. In the case of the LTTE, its program for an independent Eelam was drawn directly from the bourgeois TULF that represented the meagre aims of the Tamil bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka, which had no perspective either for the hundreds of thousands of Tamil plantation workers in the centre of the island or for the Tamil masses across the Palk Strait in southern India.

25-5. An RCL statement cited in the document explained: "[N]ational liberation cannot be achieved through a movement based on national exclusivism and aimed to win one's own rights only. In our epoch, such a movement will find itself isolated among capitalist nations, whatever the strength of the mass movement it may generate. A liberation movement of a particular oppressed nation can go forward only as part and parcel of a movement fighting fully and unreservedly for democracy. National exclusivism prevents the national liberation struggle of an oppressed nation from becoming part of such a movement. This is because, in the last analysis, national exclusivism is connected to the attempt made by the national bourgeoisie to exploit the workers and peasants in its own country. Herein lies the source from which flows the political impotence of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam." [59] The ICFI statement laid the basis for a wider consideration of the support of the Marxist movement for the right of nations to self-determination.

25-6. Shortly after the statement's publication, Keerthi Balasuriya died suddenly and tragically on 18 December 1987 from a coronary thrombosis. He was just 39 years old and had devoted his entire adult life to the struggle for Trotskyism. At the age of 19, amid the political confusion generated by the LSSP's betrayal, Balasuriya undertook the huge responsibility of leading the RCL and, in so doing, reknitting the ties of the Sri Lankan working class to the international Trotskyist movement. He and the RCL stood against the tide of middle-class radicalism and the cult of the "armed struggle" that animated movements such as the LTTE and JVP in the late 1960s and 1970s. He defended the Theory of Permanent Revolution when it came under universal attack not only from the Stalinist parties and their various Pabloite apologists, but also from the WRP within the ICFI. In doing so, Balasuriya made an indelible contribution to the struggle for Trotskyism in Asia and internationally.

25-7. In his funeral oration, David North explained: "Comrade Keerthi was profoundly convinced of the scientific validity of the perspective for which Trotsky had fought. While the petty-bourgeois radicals were impressed by the 'successes' of Mao Tse-tung, Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro, Comrade Keerthi insisted that the political orientation of Marxists had to be to the proletariat as the sole consistently revolutionary force on the planet ... In the period immediately ahead, the workers, not only in Asia but throughout the world, will read and study the writings of Comrade Keerthi. And we are confident that it will not be the Mao Tse-tungs, Ho Chi Minhs and Castros that will be the teachers of the youth. Rather, it will be from Keerthi Balasuriya, the Revolutionary Communist League and the International Committee that the advanced elements among the workers and the youth will learn their revolutionary lessons." [60]

25-8. Balasuriya's untimely death was a major political blow to the RCL, to the ICFI and to the international working class. It came at a critical time when the process of clarifying and consolidating the RCL in the immediate aftermath of the split with the WRP renegades was still underway. It is testimony to Balasuriya and the principles for which he fought that the cadre he had been instrumental in training was capable of withstanding the loss, reconsolidating under the leadership of Wije Dias, and waging a consistent struggle for socialist internationalism under the difficult conditions of an escalating civil war.

To be continued

Footnotes:

54. *Fourth International*, Volume 13, No. 2, p. 77.

55. *Fourth International*, Volume, 14 No. 1, p. 4.

56. *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1988), p. 45.

57. *Fourth International*, Volume 15, No. 1, January–March 1988, pp. 20–21.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.



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