

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 11

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

26. The International Perspectives of the ICFI

26-1. The ICFI's Perspective Resolution of August 1988, *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, provided the first comprehensive analysis of world economy and world politics since the WRP abandoned such work in the early 1970s. The resolution laid the basis for the closer integration of all of the sections of the ICFI. Central to the document was its examination of the implications of the unprecedented global integration of production processes, which marked a qualitative shift in world economic relations that objectively strengthened the international unity of the working class and the basis for a world socialist economy. The ICFI concluded: "It has long been an elementary proposition of Marxism that the class struggle is national only in form, but that it is, in essence, an international struggle. However, given the new features of capitalist development, even the form of the class struggle must assume an international character. Even the most elemental struggles of the working class pose the necessity of coordinating its actions on an international scale ... The unprecedented international mobility of capital has rendered all nationalist programs for the labour movement of different countries obsolete and reactionary. Such programs are invariably based on the voluntary collaborations of the labour bureaucracies with 'their' ruling classes in the systematic lowering of workers' living standards to strengthen the position of 'their' capitalist country in the world market." [61]

26-2. The bankruptcy of nationally-based programs was reflected in the wave of "renunciationism" sweeping the old leaderships of the working class. The Stalinist and social-democratic parties and the trade unions were repudiating "even the elementary conceptions that the proletariat exists as a distinct class in society and that it must defend its independent interests against capitalist exploitation." The ICFI analysed in detail the advanced degeneration of the Stalinist bureaucracies in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. In opposition to all of the middle-class opportunist tendencies, the ICFI insisted that Gorbachev's glasnost and

perestroika were the policies of capitalist restoration—as was rapidly verified. The document established that the crisis of the armed Tamil groups in Sri Lanka was part of broader international processes stemming from the inability of the national bourgeoisie to wage a consistent struggle against imperialism. The LTTE's capitulation to New Delhi found diverse parallels in the Palestine Liberation Organisation's subordination of the Palestinian intifada to the reactionary interests of the Arab bourgeoisie, and in the deal struck by the Nicaraguan Sandinistas with right-wing Contra rebels.

26-3. The ICFI insisted that the global integration of production, far from opening up a new golden age of capitalism, had raised the fundamental contradictions between world economy and the outmoded nation-state system, and between social production and private ownership, to a new peak of intensity. The resolution identified the driving forces for a new period of revolutionary upsurge, including the economic decline of the United States and the rise of inter-imperialist antagonisms, the emergence of huge new battalions of the working class, particularly in Asia, the impoverishment of the backward countries and the crisis of Stalinism.

26-4. Turning to its strategic tasks, the ICFI summed up the lessons of the struggle following the 1985–86 split to overcome residual nationalist tendencies that were the legacy of the WRP's degeneration. "Revolutionary internationalism is the political antipode of opportunism. In one form or another, opportunism expresses a definite adaptation to the so-called realities of political life within a given national environment. Opportunism, forever in search of shortcuts, elevates one or another national tactic above the fundamental program of the world socialist revolution. Considering the program of world socialist revolution too abstract, the opportunist hankers after supposedly concrete tactical initiatives. Not only does the opportunist choose to 'forget' the international character of the working class. He also 'overlooks' the fact that the crisis in each country, having its essential origin in global contradictions, can only be resolved on the basis of an international program. No national tactic, however significant its role in the political arsenal of the party ... can preserve its revolutionary content if it is elevated above or, what amounts to the same thing, detached from, the world strategy of the International Committee. Thus, the central historic contribution which the sections of the International Committee make to the workers' movement in the countries in which they operate is the collective and unified struggle for the perspective of world socialist revolution." [62]

27. The Collapse of the Soviet Union

27-1. The International Perspectives prepared the IC for the political crisis of Stalinism that erupted in 1989 with mass protests in China, followed shortly thereafter by the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, that culminated in December 1991 in the formal liquidation of the Soviet Union. The destruction of the Soviet Union was a political blow against the international working class that produced considerable disorientation and confusion. Against the triumphalism of the bourgeoisie, the International Committee was alone in insisting that the end of the Soviet Union did not signify the victory of the capitalist market and the end of socialism. Trotsky in his seminal work *The Revolution Betrayed*, published in 1936, had predicted the eventual liquidation of the remaining social gains of the Russian Revolution and the restoration of capitalist property relations unless the Soviet working class carried out a political revolution to oust the Stalinist bureaucracy. The end of the USSR did not represent the failure of socialism but of Stalinism and its reactionary nationalist perspective of “Socialism in One Country” under the impact of globalised production. Having long ago abandoned the struggle for the world socialist revolution, the Stalinist bureaucracy responded to the crisis of the Soviet economy, and growing working-class unrest, by integrating it within global capitalism and anchoring, thereby, its own privileges in capitalist private property. The collapse of the USSR was a product of the unravelling of the post-war order and the intensification of the fundamental contradiction of capitalism between world economy and the bankrupt nation-state system. Far from opening up a bright new future for capitalism, the end of the Soviet Union and its autarkic national economy foreshadowed the transformation or collapse of all parties and institutions based on national economic regulation. The ICFI explained that the intensification of the basic contradictions of capitalism would inevitably lead to a new period of profound economic crisis, wars and revolution.

27-2. The inability of the Soviet and Eastern European working class to develop its own class response to capitalist restorationism brought into sharp relief the enormous damage done to the political consciousness of the international working class by the long domination of the various Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist bureaucracies and, above all, by the murder of the finest representatives of revolutionary Marxism by Stalin and his gangsters in the 1930s. In opposition to any conception that socialist revolution would emerge spontaneously, David North in his report to the 12th Plenum of the ICFI explained: “The intensification of the class struggle provides the general foundation of the revolutionary movement. But it does not by itself directly and automatically create the political, intellectual, and, one might add, cultural environment that its development requires, and which prepares the historical setting for a truly revolutionary situation.”[63] The report concluded that the responsibility fell to the International Committee to re-establish within the working class the great political culture of Marxism. An essential component of the ICFI’s subsequent work has been the systematic exposure of the various elements of what it termed “The Post-Soviet School of Falsification” that has sought to bury the significance of the Russian Revolution and particularly the work of Leon Trotsky under a mountain of lies.

27-3. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics, the collapse of the Stalinist regimes led to a rapid opening up to foreign investment, the wholesale looting of state-owned enterprises by the emerging kleptocracy and a staggering retrogression in the living standards of working people. In China, the process of capitalist restoration was more protracted. Just 23 years after the revolution, the Maoist regime reached an accommodation with US imperialism in 1972 that led to a de facto alliance against the Soviet Union and re-established China’s economic relations with the West. The opening of China to foreign investment and the restoration of capitalist market relations began after Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1978, producing growing resistance in the working class. In the wake of

the violent suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in June 1989, an ICFI statement entitled “Victory to the Political Revolution in China” explained: “The mass killings of the past week are the political culmination of a decade during which the Beijing Stalinists have worked systematically to restore capitalism to China and reintegrate its economy into the structure of world imperialism. The main purpose of the terror unleashed by the Beijing regime is to intimidate the Chinese masses and crush all opposition to its deliberate liquidation of the social conquests of the Chinese Revolution.”[64] Following the crackdown, foreign investment flooded into China as transnational corporations concluded that the Tiananmen Square massacre was a guarantee that the CCP police state regime would not hesitate to use all methods to suppress the working class and guarantee private profit. The restoration of capitalism in China under the CCP has been accompanied by the emergence of a bourgeoisie in close association with the state bureaucracy, a deepening social divide, and a return of many of the social evils of pre-1949 China.

27-4. The liquidation of the Soviet Union had political and economic ramifications throughout Asia, not least in India, which depended heavily on Soviet markets, economic aid and geopolitical support. In 1991, facing a balance of payments crisis, the Congress government began the process of dismantling the edifice of Indian national economic regulation and opening up to foreign investment. The Indian Stalinist parties not only supported the new orientation but, in the states of West Bengal and Kerala where it held power, the CPM led the charge for pro-market restructuring. The collapse of the Cold War framework ended the ability of the bourgeoisie in backward capitalist countries to politically balance between the Soviet and Western blocs and to posture, with the aid of Moscow and Beijing, as “anti-imperialists.” Again the process was especially pronounced in India, a leading member of the so-called non-aligned movement with strong ties to the Soviet Union. New Delhi began to mend its bridges with Washington and drop its previous support for national movements such as the PLO.

27-5. The naked embrace of capitalism in the former Soviet bloc and China compounded the political crisis of the region’s Stalinist parties, which either collapsed completely like the Communist Party of Thailand, fractured as in the case of the Communist Party of the Philippines, or completed their integration into the political establishment as in Japan and India. The various armed national liberation movements, as epitomised by the LTTE’s advocacy of a “Tiger economy” for Sri Lanka, rapidly shed their former “socialist” posturing, embraced the ideology of the market and sought their own accommodation with imperialism.

28. The RCL and the United Front

28-1. An acute economic and political crisis dominated Sri Lanka throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s. As fighting broke out in the North between the LTTE and the Indian army, mounting unrest among the working class and rural poor was derailed by a combination of state repression and the JVP’s chauvinist campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord. JVP gunmen targeted politicians and parties that supported the Accord. The government imposed martial law in November 1988, mandating the death penalty for organising or participating in strikes or protests. The UNP’s Ranasinghe Premadasa—who had opposed the Accord—won the presidential election in December 1988 and immediately sought a deal with the JVP in order to stabilise bourgeois rule.

28-2. A de facto alliance between the UNP government and the JVP confronted the working class with state repression as well as the JVP’s fascistic attacks on anyone who opposed its orders to join its “strikes” to “defend the motherland.” The RCL was the only party to fight for the

independent mobilisation of workers against both the Indo-Lankan Accord and the JVP's chauvinist campaign. On this basis, the RCL won the leadership of the Central Bank Employees Union (CBEU) in June 1988. As a result of its stand, the RCL confronted police raids and arrests as well as JVP attacks. JVP thugs murdered RCL members R.A. Pitawela on November 12, 1988, P.H. Gunapala on December 23, 1988 and Gretian Geekiyanage on June 23, 1989.

28-3. In collaboration with its sister parties in the ICFI, the RCL initiated a campaign in November 1988 for a united front of all parties of the working class to take immediate concrete measures to defend workers and their organisations from state repression and JVP attacks. In a letter to working-class parties, the RCL called for a break from the parties of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie—the UNP, SLFP and SLMP—and the mobilisation of “the class strength of the working class to defend basic democratic rights.” The RCL called for workers’ defence squads and action committees, joint picket lines and a general strike, and despite extremely difficult circumstances, campaigned vigorously for its demands in the working class. The ICFI’s international campaign for the United Front included an extensive tour of Australia and New Zealand by two RCL members in conjunction with the Australian SLL.

28-4. The call for a United Front in no way implied a political amnesty for the opportunist parties, which unanimously opposed it. Speaking for all of them, the NSSP denounced the United Front as “sectarian” and “ultra-left” for refusing to include the SLMP, which the NSSP falsely described as the “new proletarian reformist mass tendency”. The NSSP’s own “United Socialist Alliance” with the SLMP, the LSSP and CP was classic popular frontism, aimed at soliciting protection from the UNP government and state apparatus. In its reply, the RCL warned: “In the first place, it [the rejection of a united front] is an act which is absolutely hostile to the active organisation of practical measures by the working class against its class enemy. Second, it ties the working class to fronts formed on bourgeois programs, weakens and politically disarms it, and creates the opportunity for the class enemy to drown the working class and the poor peasants in a blood bath.” The “left” parties dropped any criticism of the government’s repressive measures and received arms in return, while hundreds of militant workers and trade unionists paid for this treachery with their lives.

29. The RCL and the peasantry

29-1. Confronting mounting social unrest in the South, President Premadasa took a pronounced public stand against the Indo-Lankan Accord, demanding that Indian troops leave Sri Lanka by July 1989. He signed a ceasefire with, and covertly supplied arms to, the LTTE in June 1989, thereby assisting its armed struggle against the Indian army. Having failed to reach a deal with the JVP, the UNP turned on it and then more broadly against its social base—the Sinhala peasantry. In November 1989, the security forces detained and brutally murdered most of the JVP leadership, including its top leader Rohana Wijeweera. These murders were the start of a virtual war waged by the security forces and associated death squads against the rural masses over the next two years in which an estimated 60,000 people were slaughtered.

29-2. The abrupt about-face by the Sri Lankan ruling class confronted the RCL with new political challenges that were discussed extensively within the ICFI. The RCL had to warn the working class about the grave dangers of state repression and energetically call on workers to oppose the violent attacks on rural youth. It was not simply a matter of the fate of the JVP leaders, but the social base on which the organisation rested. Just as it had done in the wake of the April 1971 uprising, the RCL had to maintain

an intransigent opposition to the government in all aspects of the party’s work, champion the defence of the rural masses and, in doing so, concretely forge the alliance between the working class and the peasantry necessary for the socialist revolution.

29-3. The RCL issued a comprehensive statement opposing the state massacre of rural youth in the South and the renewed war in the North against the Tamil masses in the aftermath of the Indian army withdrawal. It explained that the defence of the rural masses—Sinhala and Tamil alike—was indissolubly bound up with the fight to abolish capitalism and establish a workers’ and peasants’ government in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam. The RCL indicted the opportunist leaderships of the working class—the LSSP, CP and NSSP—both for supporting the war in the North and blocking any independent political mobilisation of the working class to defend the rural masses in the South. The statement outlined a detailed program of transitional demands to address the democratic aspirations and pressing economic needs of workers and the rural peasantry. On this basis, the RCL carried out an extensive campaign to expose the atrocities being carried out by state forces and to mobilise workers and students to defend the rural youth.

30. The National Question

30-1. The ICFI returned to a critical re-examination of the national question following the eruption of separatist movements in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In his writings of 1913–16, Lenin had advocated the “right to self-determination” as a means of uniting the working class and rallying the support of the oppressed nationalities for the struggle against Czarism and imperialism. As Trotsky explained: “In this the Bolshevik Party did not by any means undertake an evangel of separation. It merely assumed an obligation to struggle implacably against every form of national oppression, including the forcible retention of this or that nationality within the boundaries of the general state. Only in this way could the Russian proletariat gradually win the confidence of the oppressed nationalities.”[65] Yet in the decades after World War II, the Pabloites and numerous other petty-bourgeois pseudo-Marxists systematically distorted the “right to self-determination” to mean that the working class was politically obligated to support virtually any demand for national-ethnic separatism.

30-2. Lenin’s stance had always been conditional on socio-economic circumstances and the development of the class struggle. On the eve of World War I, when Lenin had advocated the right to self-determination in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Czarist Empire, these regions were still predominantly agrarian and capitalism and the national movement were largely in their infancy. Nearly a century on, conditions in these regions, as around the world, were vastly different. Small cliques of ex-Stalinist bureaucrats and capitalists whipped up ethnic and communal sentiment in the countries of Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Russia, as a means to carve out their own territory as part of the process of capitalist restoration. Far from being anti-imperialist, these movements actively sought the support of the imperialist powers which, as in the case of Balkans, encouraged separatism as a means of furthering their economic and strategic ambitions. In Lenin’s day, the national movements in the colonial and semi-colonial countries of Asia and Africa had barely begun. Nearly a century later, it was the abject failure of the nationalist movements that gained “independence” after World War II to resolve basic democratic tasks that spawned new separatist tendencies based on ethnicity, religion and language.

30-3. The globalisation of production was a key factor in the spread of national-separatist movements at the end of the twentieth century. The

processes of globalisation vastly reduced the significance of national markets and nationally-based production in comparison to the global market and globally-integrated production. As the International Committee explained: “The new global economic relations have also provided an objective impulse for a new type of nationalist movement, seeking the dismemberment of existing states. Globally-mobile capital has given smaller territories the ability to link themselves directly to the world market. Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan have become the new models of development. A small coastal enclave, possessing adequate transportation links, infrastructure and a supply of cheap labour may prove a more attractive base for multinational capital than a larger country with a less productive hinterland.”[66]

30-4. Summing up the character of the new separatist movements, the ICFI explained: “In India and China,” the national movements of the first half of the twentieth century “posed the progressive task of unifying disparate peoples in a common struggle against imperialism—a task which proved unrealisable under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. The new form of nationalism promotes separatism along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, with the aim of dividing up existing states for the benefit of local exploiters. Such movements have nothing to do with a struggle against imperialism, nor do they in any sense embody the democratic aspirations of the masses of oppressed. They serve to divide the working class and divert the class struggle into ethno-communal warfare.”[67] In the interests of unifying the working class, the International Committee insisted on a critical, even hostile, attitude to the proliferation of national separatist movements and their invocation of “the right to self-determination” to justify the formation of separate capitalist states.

30-5. This analysis has a particular relevance to South Asia where the national bourgeoisie’s abortion of the democratic revolution and the failure of its respective nationalist projects has produced a multitude of divisive bourgeois tendencies based on religion, caste, language and ethnicity. In India, the turn from the old schemes of national economic regulation to the embrace of foreign investment and integration in global production processes has accentuated regional economic disparities and deepened social inequality. The resulting social crisis and popular anger is being exploited by various bourgeois tendencies to promote ethnic separatism, including to press for the creation of separate ethnically-defined nation-states in Kashmir, Tamil Nadu, Assam and other parts of the north-east. The ICFI explained: “The central question here is, how does the revolutionary party of the working class respond to the breakup of the old bourgeois nationalist movements? Are the masses in these countries to advance their interests through new separatist movements based on fragments of the states created through decolonisation and founded on religious particularism? We categorically reject such a perspective. Such statelets will provide no way forward for the working class and the oppressed masses of India or anywhere else. At best they will create profits for a thin layer of the privileged classes if they are able to create a free trade zone and cut their own deals with transnational capital. For the masses, they hold out the prospect only of ethnic bloodbaths and intensified exploitation.”[68]

30-6. As part of the ICFI discussion, the RCL concluded that support for the right of “self-determination for the Tamil people”, which in practical political terms could only mean support for the national separatist project of the LTTE, no longer had any progressive content. As the war restarted in 1990, the LTTE took on an even more pronounced anti-democratic and communal character: outlawing political opposition and murdering political rivals; denouncing all Muslims as “enemy agents” and driving them out of Jaffna; killing captured soldiers and police; and indiscriminately attacking Sinhalese civilians. While rejecting the LTTE’s separatist program, the RCL continued to intransigently oppose the Sri Lankan government’s efforts to forcibly maintain the island’s unity by military means. Its demand for the unconditional withdrawal of the armed

forces from the North and East did not imply support for a separate Eelam. Rather, in opposing the military oppression of Tamils, the RCL was seeking to unite the working class and oppressed masses in a revolutionary struggle for the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

To be continued

Footnotes:

61. *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, pp. 6–7.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 70–71.

63. David North, “The Struggle for Marxism and the Tasks of the Fourth International,” *Fourth International*, Volume 19, Number 1, Fall Winter 1992, p. 74.

64. *Fourth International*, Volume 16, Nos. 1–2, p. 1.

65. Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, Volume 3 (London: Sphere Books, 1967) pp. 41–42.

66. International Committee of the Fourth International, *Globalisation and the International Working Class*, Mehring Books, 1998, p. 108.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 115.



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