

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 12

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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31. The Socialist Equality Party

31-1. The transformation of the RCL into the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in 1996 flowed from the conclusions drawn by the ICFI about the transformation of all the old organisations of the working class. In conditions of the post-war stabilisation and economic expansion of capitalism, the various trade union, social democratic and Stalinist organisations had, within the framework of national economic regulation, been able to make limited immediate gains for the working class, while betraying its long-term historical interests. The IC sections had taken the form of leagues in recognition that the social democratic and Stalinist organisations still held the political allegiance of broad layers of socialist-minded workers, intellectuals and youth. The RCL's demand that the LSSP and CP break from the SLFP and take the road to the formation of a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies was aimed at exposing these parties and winning the most advanced layers of the working class. However, the globalisation of production had destroyed any objective basis for national reformism and transformed the old organisations into direct agencies of the national bourgeoisie in slashing jobs, conditions and living standards in the never-ending race for "international competitiveness." In no sense could these parties and trade unions any longer be considered organisations based on the working class or speaking in its name.

31-2. The LSSP and CP entered a third SLFP-led coalition government in 1994 under prime minister, later president, Chandrika Kumaratunga. The two parties had never recovered from the profound hostility in the working class generated by their participation in the Bandaranaike government of the 1970s. By the time they joined the People's Alliance (PA), the LSSP and CP were hollow shells. No workers expected either party to fight for basic social reforms, let alone take up the revolutionary struggle for socialism. Any lingering illusions were quickly dispelled by the LSSP and CP's support for Kumaratunga's escalating war and attacks on basic democratic rights and living standards. They have subsequently functioned as virtual factions of the SLFP, rather than independent parties.

31-3. The NSSP, whose leaders never opposed the first two coalition

governments, backed Kumaratunga's election. One faction headed by Vasudeva Nanayakkara drew the logical conclusion from the NSSP's program of class collaboration and joined the PA government. The NSSP and its offshoot, the United Socialist Party (USP), have remained as satellites of the Colombo establishment, entering into a series of increasingly grotesque political marriages. In the mid-1990s, as hostility to the PA government grew, the NSSP struck a deal with the JVP, whose gunmen had been killing its members just a decade previously. The JVP, which had been legalised by Kumaratunga, used the NSSP as a stepping stone to establishing a presence in the trade unions then broke off the alliance. Throughout their various political twists and turns, the NSSP and USP have maintained one constant: their visceral hostility to the SEP's fight for the political independence of the working class.

31-4. The evolution of the trade unions in Sri Lanka paralleled that of the union apparatuses in the advanced capitalist countries. Under the impact of globalised production, the union bureaucracies abandoned the defence of even the most basic rights of the working class and have been transformed into direct agents of management. In the wake of the unions' betrayals, particularly after the 1980 general strike, union membership plummeted. However, unlike their counterparts in the US and Europe, the unions in Sri Lanka, for the most part, lacked alternate sources of income and rapidly decayed. As the unions were federated by party affiliation, disgust with the old party leaderships compounded their precipitous decline.

31-5. The so-called plantation unions, in the first instance the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), form a special case. The CWC always functioned more as a paternalistic benevolent society than a trade union. It retained a significant membership and resources due to its control, with the support of management, over every aspect of life on the plantations—from housing, health care and schooling to marriages, funerals and religious celebrations. Using its members as a captive vote bank, CWC leaders entered parliament and bartered for ministerial positions and privileges. The various alternative unions such as the Up Country People's Front (UPF) operated no differently. None of these organisations, which together act to suppress one of the most oppressed sections of the working class, commands any significant positive support among workers.

31-6. The establishment of the SEP was the pivotal first step in preparing for new movements of the working class. These movements will not take place through the old organisations, but in a revolt against them—a revolt that has to be politically prepared and organisationally led by the SEP. The Socialist Equality Party was adopted as the new name after extensive discussion in the International Committee to focus on the essential aim of socialism—to end social inequality—that had been obscured by decades of misuse of the term by Social Democracy, Stalinism and

Pabloism. In its 1996 perspectives document, the SEP concluded: “The recognition of the changed relationship of the working class and the oppressed masses to all the old parties and bureaucracies demand that the sections of the International Committee assume the leadership of the impending revolutionary struggles of the masses.”

32. The World Socialist Web Site

32-1. The establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998 marked a decisive turning point in the development for the ICFI and the international working class. The ICFI’s ability to take advantage of the revolutionary developments in computer technology and to coordinate the political work of its sections on a daily basis to produce the WSWS was a product of the programmatic clarity and unity that had been achieved in the aftermath of the 1985–86 split with the WRP. The *World Socialist Web Site* not only allowed the ICFI to greatly extend its audience but provided the new scaffolding around which the international working class could integrate its struggles and coalesce into a conscious political force to abolish capitalism.

32-2. The *World Socialist Web Site* was not simply a technical or organisational initiative but was rooted in fundamental political conceptions. At the 18th Plenum of the ICFI, David North elaborated these foundations: “(1) The insistence of the ICFI on the primacy of internationalism as the basis of the political strategy and tactical organisation of the working class. (2) The uncompromising character of the struggle waged by the ICFI against the domination of the working class by reactionary labour bureaucracies. (3) The emphasis placed upon the revival of a genuine socialist political culture within the working class as an essential intellectual and, one might add, ‘spiritual’ premise of a new international revolutionary movement. This is the essential intellectual substance and precondition of socialist revolution. (4) The struggle against spontaneism and political fatalism in relation to the development of the crisis of capitalism, the class struggle, and the socialist revolution.”[69]

32-3. The launching of the WSWS was a significant break from previous forms of party work that were focused on the production and distribution of newspapers. The WSWS enabled the ICFI to regularly reach an international audience on a scale that was impossible through the relatively limited sale of newspapers by each of its national sections. The daily production of the WSWS integrated the work of all sections of the ICFI to an unprecedented degree and concentrated their work on developing the Marxist political and theoretical analysis needed to politically prepare and guide a new revolutionary working class offensive. In the case of Sri Lanka, collaboration on the WSWS ended the relative isolation that the RCL/SEP had suffered for many years.

32-4. The effectiveness of the WSWS as an instrument of political struggle in every country was decisively confirmed in the extensive campaign waged by the Sri Lankan SEP and the International Committee in 1998 to release four SEP members detained by the LTTE for agitating for the party’s program. Confronted by the impact of the broad international campaign, including among the Tamil diaspora in North America, Europe and Australia, the LTTE ultimately released the SEP members unharmed.

33. The Sri Lankan crisis of 2000

33-1. At the turn of the millennium, the Sri Lankan government was in complete disarray following a series of military debacles starting with the fall of Elephant Pass to the LTTE in April 2000. Amid what she described as “the gravest crisis faced by the Colombo rule since 1948”, President Kumaratunga was desperate for political support. Suddenly, after being denied official party status for more than two decades, the SEP was granted formal recognition. A week later, the SEP received a presidential invitation to attend an all-party conference to discuss the political crisis. In a statement rejecting the invitation, Wije Dias denounced the talks as being “to rubberstamp government decisions already made, lend credibility to its policies and garner support for the continuation of a war that has had disastrous consequences for working people, both Sinhalese and Tamil, throughout the island.”

33-2. At the June 2000 plenum of the WSWS and ICFI, the significance of Kumaratunga’s letter and the political lessons for all sections of the ICFI were exhaustively discussed. In his opening report, David North explained: “We must recognise as a significant turning point in the history of the International Committee that a section of our movement has received an invitation to participate in all-party talks with the national government. It is not a matter of feeling honoured—we are certainly not. Rather, it is a significant substantiation of a point we have been making for some time: that beneath the surface of existing and long-established political relationships—in which certain parties, organisations, individuals and relations have dominated and seemed almost immovable, with nothing appearing to change—a great deal is changing. Beneath the surface, class relations are changing. The movement of socio-economic tectonic plates, intensified by the breathtaking transformations in technology; alterations in patterns of world trade and economic intercourse—i.e., profound changes in the mode of production and production relations—are building immense charges into the whole political superstructure and preparing the way for a sudden, dramatic and devastating political transformation.”

33-3. The plenum cautioned against any tendency towards complacency or political passivity. The ICFI had to be ready for sudden political shifts, which could involve further attempts to draw out of its sections new bases of support for bourgeois rule as well as the use of state repression. What was emphasised was the necessity of sustained political and theoretical work to prepare the party and ensure that it was not caught unprepared. By constantly working over political questions, the party counteracts the pressures spontaneously generated by bourgeois society on the working class and its vanguard and ensures that it does not react to events in a petty-bourgeois, impressionistic manner. That included an appreciation of the role of the sections of the IC as the essential ingredient in the development of a revolutionary, socialist movement of the working class and rural masses.

34. War and militarism

34-1. The end of the Cold War geopolitical framework led to an intensification of imperialist rivalries and the eruption of militarism. US imperialism, as the sole remaining “superpower”, sought to offset its economic decline through the aggressive use of its residual military might. Using the pretext of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the US put into operation longstanding plans to establish its dominance of the energy-rich Middle East. The 1990–91 Gulf War was backed by every imperialist power as the means of legitimising its own future predatory ambitions, as well as by the Soviet and Chinese regimes and the labour bureaucracies in every country. In its 1991 manifesto entitled *Oppose Imperialist War and Colonialism*, the ICFI concluded that a new period of neo-colonialism had

opened up. “This ongoing and de facto partition of Iraq signals the start of a new division of the world by the imperialists. The conquests and annexations which, according to the opportunist apologists of imperialism, belonged to a bygone era are once again on the order of the day.”[70]

34-2. While the first Gulf War was conducted under the United Nations banner, the US-led military intervention against Serbia in 1999 had no such fig leaf. The excuse for NATO’s war in the Balkans—to prevent the genocide of Kosovars—was generalised to a humanitarian pretext to justify further neo-colonial operations. In reality, the Balkans war was part of a broader US strategy to exploit opportunities opening up following the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly in the newly-established, resource-rich republics of Central Asia. The Bush administration seized on the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks as the justification for the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 in furtherance of US ambitions to subjugate the Middle East and Central Asia. Bush’s new doctrine of “pre-emptive war” was identical to the principal crime for which Nazi leaders were tried after World War II—waging a war of aggression. The limited opposition to the Iraq war in the UN Security Council led by France was based solely on fears that the US was cutting across the vested interests of other powers in the Middle East. The unprecedented emergence of mass internationally-coordinated protests against the invasion of Iraq underlined both the objective, revolutionary potential of the antiwar movement and its political weakness—the fatal illusion, cultivated by every pseudo-radical organisation, that the war could be halted through pressure on governments or through the UN. The failure of the protests underscored the basic lesson of Marxism—that war can only be averted through the independent mobilisation of the working class to abolish the underlying cause, the profit system and the outmoded division of the world into capitalist nation states.

34-3. The explosion of American militarism over the past two decades has had a profoundly destabilising impact around the world, especially in South Asia. Tensions between Pakistan and India have intensified as each has attempted to deflect acute social tensions at home by stirring up chauvinist sentiment against its rival. The two countries each tested nuclear weapons in 1998 and almost came to blows in 1999 when Pakistani troops and Islamic militants infiltrated and occupied the Kargil region of Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir. After the US compelled Pakistan to withdraw support for the militants, the military headed by General Pervez Musharraf seized power. The US further destabilised Pakistan in 2001 by forcing Musharraf to end support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and assist the US-led military intervention. Taking advantage of Washington’s bogus “war on terrorism”, New Delhi took an increasingly belligerent approach to Islamabad. After Islamic militants attacked the parliament building in New Delhi in December 2001, India marshalled well over half a million troops along the border with Pakistan. The two nuclear armed powers were poised on the brink of all-out war for months before backing off. The decade-long neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan has spilled over the border into Pakistan and, under President Obama, has become the AfPak war. Escalating CIA drone attacks and devastating US-backed Pakistani army operations in tribal areas inside Pakistan have compounded the deep political crisis in Islamabad. Nothing testifies to the political bankruptcy of the bourgeoisie and its agencies in the working class throughout the Indian subcontinent so much as the lack of any opposition—other than that of reactionary Islamist groups—to the AfPak war, the first direct imperialist intervention in South Asia since 1947.

35. The crisis of capitalism and the tasks of the SEP

35-1. The global financial crisis that erupted in September 2008 with the collapse of the US investment bank Lehman Brothers was not a conjunctural economic downturn, but a fundamental breakdown of the capitalist order. Optimism that the trillions of dollars injected by governments to prop up the financial system and major corporations had restabilised the economic system has rapidly faded. The bailouts and stimulus packages effectively transferred the mountains of bad debt of private swindlers and speculators onto the public books and are now being imposed on the working class in every country in the form of austerity measures. The economic crisis is still unfolding and taking more malignant forms. Australian SEP National Secretary Nick Beams explained: “A breakdown does not mean that capitalism comes to a halt. It signifies the opening of a new period of history, in which old structures, both economic and political, as well as ideologies and ways of thinking, give way, and new forms of political struggle develop in which the fate of society itself is up for decision.”[71]

35-2. The worsening economic crisis will further exacerbate geopolitical antagonisms—in the first place between the United States and China. The rapid economic rise of China inevitably brings it into competition with its more established rivals and other emerging powers such as India, as it scours the world for energy, raw materials and markets. To protect its shipping lanes, China is expanding its military, especially naval, power, but this in turn threatens the longstanding US dominance in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Now the world’s largest debtor nation, the United States has already lost its post-war position as the world’s economic hegemon and is recklessly using its residual military might to undermine its rivals. The US will not peacefully relinquish its previous dominance and China, which is wracked by its own acute economic and social instabilities, cannot allow Washington to dictate terms. This intensifying rivalry, which is already evident in trade and currency disputes, inexorably draws in other powers and threatens to drag humanity into another catastrophic world war.

35-3. Asia as a whole has been transformed into an arena of intensifying competition between the US and China. To shore up its previously dominant position in North East Asia, Japan is strengthening its military alliance with Washington. India, which harbours its own ambitions to be a global power, has established a strategic partnership with Washington. In every country, the ruling class confronts a basic dilemma: how to balance between China, now the largest trading partner of virtually every country in Asia, and the United States, which is still the world’s largest economy and strongest military power. The devastating consequences of this geopolitical struggle are already evident in Afghanistan, which has been reduced to a US-dominated colonial outpost in Central Asia, and neighbouring Pakistan, which is convulsed by political crisis and conflict.

35-4. Sri Lanka has been drawn into the vortex of this competition as a result of its central position astride the Indian Ocean’s major shipping lanes. The end of the island’s protracted civil war in 2009 intensified the rivalry between the US, China and India for the dominant position in Colombo. As the LTTE’s defeat appeared imminent, the US belatedly recognised that China had greatly expanded its influence by providing military and economic aid to Sri Lanka. In return, Beijing had been allowed to develop a major new port in the southern town of Hambantota as part of its drive for strategic harbour facilities in the Indian Ocean, including in Burma, Bangladesh and Pakistan. The importance of the island for Washington was underscored by a US Senate report in December 2009, which flatly declared that the US “cannot afford to lose Sri Lanka.” Like its counterparts throughout the region, the Sri Lankan government is engaged in a precarious balancing act that will not prevent the island being drawn into a conflict that will have catastrophic consequences for the working class.

35-5. The war restarted by President Mahinda Rajapakse in 2006 left the island in ruins. With the backing of all the major powers, the government

and army waged a brutal war of attrition in which tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed and towns and villages reduced to rubble. The war was accompanied by far reaching attacks on democratic rights and the imposition of new economic burdens on the working class. Pro-government death squads working closely with the military killed or “disappeared” hundreds of people including journalists and politicians. SEP member Nadarajah Wimalaswaran vanished in March 2007 while travelling to the navy-controlled island of Kayts. The government, which blocked any investigation of the case, is politically responsible for his disappearance and likely murder.

35-6. The end of the civil war has not brought the “peace and prosperity” promised by President Rajapakse. Having mortgaged the island to the hilt to pay for the war, the government has been compelled to make ever deeper cuts to public sector jobs, services and subsidies to meet the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Wages have been effectively frozen for the past five years while prices, including those of basic staples, have skyrocketed, creating hardships for large sections of the working class and oppressed masses. The vast gulf between rich and poor is underscored by the latest social statistics showing that the poorest or bottom 20 percent of society receive only 4.5 percent of total household income compared to 54.1 percent for the top 20 percent. None of the pressing needs and aspirations of working people find political expression in any section of the Colombo establishment. The opposition parties—the UNP and JVP—fully supported the government’s war and the pro-market economic agenda being dictated by the IMF on behalf of international finance capital.

35-7. The political weakness of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie is highlighted by the Rajapakse government’s dependence on the country’s huge security forces built up over a quarter century of civil war. Nearly two years after the end of the war, draconian emergency powers are still in force and none of the troops have been demobilised. Instead, the military is intruding into aspects of government previously regarded as strictly civilian, such as the huge Colombo slum clearance program that will forcibly displace 60,000 families. The militarisation of life is summed up in Rajapakse’s exhortations to workers to sacrifice like soldiers to “build the nation.” Increasingly the Rajapakse regime has functioned as a politico-military cabal operating with scant regard for parliament, the constitution or the courts. The police state apparatus is above all directed at the suppression of any opposition by the working class and rural masses.

35-8. None of the underlying issues that led to the protracted civil war has been resolved by the LTTE’s military defeat. Six decades after formal independence, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has only managed to cling onto power by fracturing the island along communal lines. It has maintained unity solely by force of arms, currently manifest in the massive military occupation of the North and East. The legitimate grievances and anger felt by Tamils over decades of entrenched discrimination will inevitably erupt in new forms. The necessary political lessons have to be drawn, however. The LTTE’s defeat was not primarily a military one, but was the product of the inherent weaknesses of its political perspective. From the outset, its aim was to carve out a capitalist Eelam on behalf of the Tamil bourgeoisie with the backing of India or other regional and world powers. When these same powers decisively turned against it, the LTTE was reduced to impotent pleading to the “international community” to halt the military onslaught. The only social force in society capable of waging a struggle for genuine democratic rights against the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and its imperialist backers is the working class. However, the LTTE was always organically opposed to any orientation to unite workers—Tamil and Sinhala—on a class basis. Its indiscriminate attacks on Sinhalese civilians played into the hands of the Colombo establishment and deepened the communal divide. In areas under its control, the LTTE rode roughshod over the democratic rights and social needs of working people. Thus, as it

made its final stand, the LTTE leadership was completely incapable of making any broad appeal to Tamil masses, let alone to the working class throughout the island and region. The LTTE’s collapse is graphic proof of the bankruptcy of all tendencies based on bourgeois separatism.

35-9. The past quarter century of war has tested out every political tendency. Only the SEP has proven capable of waging a consistent political struggle in defence of the democratic rights of Tamils and working people as a whole, as an essential component of its strategy for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam. The SEP’s ability to withstand attacks, political and physical, from all sides stems from the strength of the principles on which it is based. The defence and development of the theory and strategy of Permanent Revolution is the only means of fighting for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie. In conducting an uncompromising struggle for Trotskyism over more than four decades, the SEP has struck deep roots in the working class and established itself as the only party that defends the historic interests of working people.

35-10. Sri Lanka demonstrates in microcosm the complete failure of the national project in all the independent states established throughout South Asia after World War II. Nowhere have bourgeois governments been able to meet the aspirations of the masses for decent living standards and basic democratic rights. Hundreds of millions of people are mired in poverty and backwardness. The decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka finds its parallels throughout the region in the reactionary exploitation of communal, ethnic and language divisions by rival sections of the ruling elite to further their own narrow interests. As the working class enters a new period of revolutionary convulsions, it is necessary to draw the essential political lessons. It is only through the unification of the working class within and across national borders that the necessary revolutionary force can be developed for the overthrow of the outmoded system of capitalism and its replacement by a world planned socialist economy. The SEP seeks to revive the best revolutionary traditions of the BLPI and bases itself on the ICFI’s program for the unity of workers and the oppressed masses for a United Socialist States of South Asia as an integral part of the world socialist revolution.

35-11. Persistent economic crises, sharpening inter-imperialist antagonisms, the growth of militarism, deepening social inequality and the profound alienation of ordinary people from existing political parties and structures are all unmistakable signs of a new protracted period of wars and revolutions. The upheavals in North Africa and the Middle East are the latest confirmation that the crisis of capitalism is generating immense class struggles. However, there remains a huge gap between the advanced character of capitalist breakdown and the present political consciousness of the working class. That can only be overcome through a patient and intransigent political struggle by the revolutionary party against the agencies of Social Democracy, Stalinism and Pabloism that block the independent mobilisation of the working class. In doing so, the SEP will encourage and assist the development of new independent organisations of the working class. Through a consistent political struggle in the working class, the party will seek to forge the necessary alliance between the proletariat and peasantry that is essential for the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government.

35-12. The central issue, however, remains to construct a revolutionary leadership to raise the consciousness of the working class to its international and historic tasks. Only a party based on the most advanced scientific theory that has drawn the necessary lessons of the previous strategic experiences of the international working class is capable of fulfilling that role. The International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections alone embody the historical heritage of contemporary Marxism—that is, of Trotskyism. It is on that basis that the SEP and its sister parties of the ICFI seek to educate, mobilise and unify the international working class, confident that the most far sighted and self-

sacrificing workers and youth will be won to its banner and provide the material forces for carrying out the world socialist revolution.

Concluded

Footnotes:

69. *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)* (Mehring Books, Sydney, 2010), p. 146.

70. *Fourth International*, Volume 18, No. 1, Summer–Fall 1991, p. 2.

71. Nick Beams, *The World Economic Crisis: A Marxist Analysis* (October 2008)

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2008/oct2008/nbe1-o04.shtml>.



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