

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 7

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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16. The Great Betrayal in Sri Lanka

16-1. The entry of the LSSP into the government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike in June 1964 was a watershed in the history of the Fourth International—for the first time a party claiming to be Trotskyist directly entered the service of the bourgeoisie. The political responsibility for the betrayal rested squarely with the United Secretariat (USec) and confirmed all of the SLL's warnings about the unprincipled reunification of the SWP with the Pabloites just a year before. The leader of the British SLL, Gerry Healy, explained that the LSSP's betrayal was “the most complete example” of betrayal by Pablo, Mandel and Pierre Frank. “These people must take responsibility, since they have been in constant communication with the LSSP in Ceylon, for the past 18 years. The answer [to the question of the LSSP's degeneration] lies not in Ceylon, but in an international study of the struggle against Pabloite revisionism. The real architects of the coalition reside in Paris.”[35]

16-2. The road to the LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government—the United Left Front (ULF) of the LSSP with the Stalinist CP and Philip Gunawardena's MEP—was encouraged and sanctioned by the USec. The International Secretariat had called in 1960 for an electoral front of “working class parties” and the 1963 unification congress declared that the LSSP had “correctly raised the question of a United Left Front, both to arrest the movement to the right and to help these masses to move towards an alternative left.”[36] The ULF, however, was precisely the type of Popular Front that Trotsky had opposed in the 1930s. Moreover, it involved parties with a proven track record of class collaboration—the racist MEP had participated in the 1956 SLFP government and the Stalinist CP had been part of the Ceylon National Congress during the war and would have joined the first UNP government if the UNP had been willing.

16-3. The ULF platform was formally signed on August 12, 1963—the 10th anniversary of the 1953 hartal—amid great professions of working

class unity. This opportunist formation had nothing in common with the united front tactic of Trotsky who had insisted on the political independence of the revolutionary party and no mixing of political programs, banners and slogans. The joint ULF platform was not “a genuinely socialist program”, as the Pabloites declared, but a list of limited reforms to be achieved through parliament and within the framework of capitalism. Moreover, the program, which the USec approved, made major concessions to the MEP's communal politics. Having dropped its demand for parity between the Sinhala and Tamil languages in 1960, the LSSP now agreed to a common platform that vaguely called for the existing Sinhala-only legislation to be made less discriminatory. Within the LSSP Central Committee, a minority led by Edmund Samarakkody correctly condemned the ULF program as popular frontism but did not call for the LSSP to break from the ULF. Samarakkody's stance was a typical centrist evasion—he was capable of recognising the opportunist character of what was proposed, but not of drawing the necessary political conclusions and breaking with the Perera leadership. The only Trotskyist criticism came from the SLL in Britain which denounced the ULF as opportunist and called on the “hundreds of devoted communists in the LSSP” to reaffirm the “principles and program of the FI and purge the party of revisionism and the revisionist leaders.”[37]

16-4. From its inception in 1960, the SLFP government had been in crisis. In response to widespread protests by Tamils over the Sinhala-only policy, Bandaranaike proscribed the Federal Party and imposed a state of emergency for much of 1961. Amidst a rising strike movement over the government's austerity measures, the government banned industrial action and deployed the army on the docks. A failed coup attempt by senior police and military officers in January 1962 reflected fears in sections of the ruling class about Bandaranaike's ability to contain the working class. Strikes were given further impetus by the formation of the Joint Committee of Trade Unions Organisation (JCTUO) in September 1963 unifying all unions, including those of plantation workers, around 21 common demands. A 69-day strike by the LSSP's Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) defied a government ultimatum to return to work and forced significant concessions by January 1964. Uncertain of her parliamentary majority, Bandaranaike prorogued parliament in February.

16-5. With her cabinet in crisis over how to deal with the mass working-class movement, Bandaranaike opened talks with the ULF parties. On March 21, as LSSP leaders were addressing a huge rally of the 21-demands movement on Galle Face Green, including large contingents of plantation workers, N.M. Perera held secret discussions with Bandaranaike over the formation of a coalition government. When the

talks became public knowledge, Bandaranaike, a class-conscious representative of the bourgeoisie, justified her actions by openly explaining the various options: “Some feel that these [strike] troubles can be eliminated by the establishment of a dictatorship. Others say that the workers should be made to work at the point of gun and bayonet. Still others maintain that a national government should be formed to solve this problem. I have considered these ideas separately and in the context of world events. My conclusion is that none of these solutions will help to get us where we want to go ... Therefore, gentlemen, I decided to initiate talks with the leaders of the working class, particularly Mr. Philip Gunawardena and Mr. N.M. Perera.”[38]

16-6. The LSSP rightwing led by Perera, supported by the so-called “centre” faction led by Colvin R. de Silva and Leslie Goonewardene, hurriedly convened a party conference for June 6–7 to authorise a coalition with the SLFP. Gerry Healy, who flew to Colombo on behalf of the ICFI, was barred from entering the conference, but campaigned vigorously outside. Inside, the resolution moved by Perera justified the betrayal by arguing that the SLFP was not a capitalist party, but “a party based on the radical petty-bourgeoisie and the lower middle class” that “had shed some of the more reactionary elements” and carried out “various measures for nationalisation.” While these declarations were a complete negation of everything that Trotsky had written on political formations such as the Kuomintang in China, they were fully in line with the Pabloite glorification of the petty-bourgeois leaderships in Cuba and Algeria. The resolution also made clear that the LSSP leadership had completely capitulated to the SLFP’s communalism—the list of 10 policies agreed upon with Bandaranaike did not refer to the language or citizenship issues. The resolution of the “centre” laid bare the political and moral collapse of the former BLPI revolutionaries—de Silva and Goonewardene. Their only “difference” with Perera was the terms of surrender to the SLFP—the coalition government, they argued, should include the other ULF parties, not just the LSSP.

16-7. The resolution of the newly-formed Revolutionary Minority unambiguously condemned the proposed coalition government as “treachery to the proletarian revolution”, stating: “The entry of the LSSP leaders into the SLFP government will result in open class collaboration, disorientation of the masses, the division of the working class and the abandonment of the struggle perspective, which will lead to the disruption of the working class movement and the elimination of the independent revolutionary axis of the Left. In the result, the forces of capitalist reaction, far from being weakened or thwarted, will be ultimately strengthened.” After the vote—501 for Perera’s resolution, 75 for the “centre” and 159 for the opposition—the Revolutionary Minority faction left the conference, met separately and formed what became the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Revolutionary) or LSSP (R).

16-8. The USec played a thoroughly opportunist role throughout. In April, that is weeks before the conference, it had been declaring that the ULF in Sri Lanka could “provide another Cuba or Algeria and prove to be even greater inspiration to revolutionary minded workers throughout the world.”[39] When news of Perera’s negotiations with Bandaranaike reached Paris, the USec scrambled to cover up its own political responsibility by calling for a return to the ULF. But Healy aptly summed up the ULF as “the sugar coating for the bitter pill of coalition”—it was the political stepping stone used by Perera into the Bandaranaike government. There was no fundamental difference between the ULF program and the LSSP’s deal with Bandaranaike. The USec expelled N.M. Perera and two others, who became ministers in the SLFP government, suspended those LSSP members who voted for his motion, but took no action for months, against the so-called “centre”, which remained within the LSSP.

16-9. The USec suppressed criticism within its ranks of the LSSP betrayal. Inside the American SWP, supporters of the ICFI led by Tim Wohlforth, who constituted an official minority, were suspended from membership for insisting on an internal party discussion on the LSSP’s entry into the Bandaranaike government—an unprecedented event in the history of the Fourth International. The minority, which had fought alongside the SLL since 1961 against the SWP’s reunification with the Pabloites, formed the American Committee for the Fourth International, which was transformed into the Workers League in November 1966.

16-10. In a statement issued in July 1964, the ICFI drew the following far-sighted conclusion: “The entry of the LSSP members into the Bandaranaike coalition marks the end of a whole epoch of the evolution of the Fourth International. It is in the direct service of imperialism, in the preparation of a defeat for the working class that revisionism in the world Trotskyist movement has found its expression.”[40]

17. The formation of the RCL

17-1. Coming in the wake of the LSSP’s betrayal, the formation of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in 1968 was the product of the intersection of the political and theoretical struggle waged by the International Committee against Pabloism and a radicalisation of workers and youth in Sri Lanka that foreshadowed the period of revolutionary upheavals internationally from 1968 to 1975.

17-2. As a small island state vulnerable to global economic and political shocks, Sri Lanka has tended to be a harbinger of broader international processes. An acute balance of payments crisis produced by falling tea prices in the early 1960s, combined with an international downturn, generated high levels of unemployment. Young people were the hardest hit, including university graduates. Youth and workers were radicalised not only through the developing movement against the Bandaranaike government but by the crimes of American imperialism—including the murder of Patrice Lumumba in 1961 and the escalating US involvement in the Vietnam War. Despite the LSSP’s political degeneration, the Trotskyist traditions of the BLPI that clung to it still proved deeply attractive. Significant layers of students in schools and universities regarded themselves as Trotskyists. At the country’s main Peradeniya university, the Trotskyists predominated.

17-3. The LSSP’s betrayal had a profound impact in Sri Lanka and internationally. The LSSP, along with the Pabloite leadership, through their adaptation to Stalinism, and especially the glorification of Maoism, had allowed the influence of Stalinist parties throughout Asia to go unchallenged. Now the Stalinists could use the LSSP’s treachery to deflect attention from their own political crimes. That was particularly the case in India, where Pabloism had effectively destroyed the Trotskyist movement and allowed the Communist Party of India (CPI) to develop unopposed. No intervention was made in the crisis that enveloped the CPI following the 1961 Sino-Soviet split and the 1962 Indo-Chinese border war and that, in 1964, resulted in the creation of the breakaway Communist Party of India (Marxist) ostensibly in opposition to the “revisionist” CPI. The CPI, the CPI (M), and the Naxalites or Maoists, who split off from the CPI (M) in 1968–69, all served to politically

subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie during the wave of worker and peasant struggles that convulsed India for a decade beginning in the late 1960s. The Naxalites demagogically invoked the LSSP's betrayal, in order to buttress all the stock Stalinist lies and slanders about Trotskyism, while pursuing their strategy of peasant-based guerrilla war.

17-4. In Sri Lanka, the LSSP's naked abandonment of proletarian internationalism and embrace of the SLFP's Sinhala supremacism opened the door for the unrestrained growth of communal politics that was to have catastrophic consequences for the island. The unified 21-demands movement of Sinhala and Tamil workers broke up after the LSSP entered the Bandaranaike government and withdrew its support. The LSSP's support for a pact between Bandaranaike and Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri in October 1964 providing for the forced repatriation of half a million Tamil plantation workers led to the immediate collapse of LSSP support in this pivotal section of the working class.

17-5. Among radicalised youth, various forms of petty-bourgeois communal politics gained from the LSSP's betrayal at the expense of genuine Marxism. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or People's Liberation Front, formed in 1966 by former CP Stalinists and Maoists, was able to expand among layers of unemployed Sinhala rural youth in the island's South. The JVP, which drew eclectically on Maoism and Castroism mixed with local Sinhala populism, used the LSSP's betrayal to demagogically denounce "Trotskyism." In the 1970s, as the Sinhala chauvinist policies of the second SLFP coalition radicalised sections of Tamil youth, various armed Tamil organisations, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), cited the actions of LSSP ministers to justify their opposition to Trotskyism and Marxism. Nearly two decades after the LSSP's betrayal, the reactionary communal politics of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie erupted in a civil war that convulsed the island for the next quarter century.

17-6. Against this political tide, a talented layer of radicalised youth, drawn to Trotskyism and the BLPI's traditions, founded the RCL in 1968. This was only possible, however, through the intervention of the ICFI to clarify the politics of Pabloism that had produced the LSSP's betrayal and continued to dominate the breakaway LSSP (R). Foremost among these youth were Keerthi Balasuriya, who was elected as general secretary at the age of just 19 and led the RCL until his untimely death in 1987, and Wije Dias, who took over as general secretary under those difficult circumstances and has directed the party for the past quarter century. The ability of the RCL to withstand the immense political pressures generated by the LSSP's betrayal and the island's protracted civil war is testimony to the soundness of the Trotskyist principles on which it was established as a section of the ICFI.

17-7. The ICFI's interventions in Sri Lanka through the SLL—first by Gerry Healy in June 1964 and then by Mike Banda, editor of the SLL's *Newsletter*, in December 1964—resulted in the formation of a pro-ICFI grouping inside the LSSP (R). The LSSP (R), however, was a hostile political environment—the party was formed in a split with the LSSP, but did not break from Pabloism and remained inside the Pabloite USec. Its secretary, Edmund Samarakkody, had attended the 1963 World Congress and voted for the reunification with the SWP. At the first LSSP (R) conference, the entire leadership combined to block a resolution by an ICFI sympathiser to debate the "international question"—that is, the struggle waged by the ICFI against Pabloite revisionism.

17-8. The political orientation of the LSSP (R) flowed from the USec's advocacy of the United Left Front. The party's main task was viewed in syndicalist terms as the struggle to continue the 21-demands movement

through what remained of the JCTUO. As the RCL later explained: "The LSSP (R) had become an organisation that was manoeuvring at the top to pull the 'left leaders' into struggle, while denouncing them as traitors before the working class. By means of this policy, they oriented the small following they had within the working class to manoeuvres to 'push the leaders to the left' and not towards organising the working class and the youth independently for a struggle against the [LSSP and CP] leaders." [41]

17-9. Dissatisfaction among student youth sympathetic to the LSSP (R) increased markedly after the party's two parliamentarians—Samarakkody and Meryl Fernando—ignored Political Bureau directions and supported a right-wing amendment to the Throne Speech in December 1964. The amendment, which relied for its success on the backing of the LSSP (R) MPs, was in effect a vote of no confidence and brought down the SLFP-LSSP government. The vote by Samarakkody and Fernando led to a collapse of support for the LSSP (R) in the March 1965 election and the loss of both its seats. The UNP won the election and formed a seven-party coalition, including the MEP and the Federal Party. In this context, a layer of students hostile to the actions of the LSSP (R) leadership formed a heterogeneous grouping, broadly supportive of Trotskyism, and began publishing the *Shakthi* newspaper in November 1965. Its leaders were, or had been, prominent in student politics at Peradeniya university. The *Shakthi* group led a protest against the Vietnam War and a week-long student strike in December 1965 to demand improved conditions that was violently suppressed by police. Wije Dias and several others were suspended, a former student leader was sacked from his job, and four students were tried on trumped-up charges of attempting to murder a policeman.

17-10. For all its radicalism, however, the *Shakthi* group was still based on the LSSP (R) politics of pressuring the LSSP and CP leaders to the left. Inside the LSSP (R), Wilfred "Spike" Perera, who had been a BLPI member during and after the war, challenged the orientation of the *Shakthi* group. He wrote a lengthy reply to a September 1965 document entitled "Lessons of December" by a *Shakthi* leader, Nimal (Nanda Wickremasinghe), who criticised the LSSP (R) for not intervening in the SLFP-LSSP protests of December 1964 that called on Bandaranaike to ignore the Throne Speech vote. In his "Not the lessons of December, but the lessons of June", Spike rejected the document's impressionist claims about the revolutionary potential of these "extra parliamentary struggles", pointing out that their demands were the maintenance of a capitalist government and the implementation of the racist Sirima-Shastri pact. He insisted that the critical political lessons to be assimilated were those of the LSSP's betrayal in June 1964. Spike's document, however, was not circulated, as the bulk of the pro-ICFI group, of which he was part, did not want to disrupt its relations with the LSSP (R) leadership.

17-11. As a result, the *Shakthi* group came under the influence of V. Karalasingham, an LSSP (R) Political Bureau member and former BLPI leader, who as a lawyer had defended the Peradeniya university students. Karalasingham was also hostile to the LSSP (R) leadership, describing Samarakkody's vote to bring down the Bandaranaike government as a "Himalayan blunder." This exaggerated criticism of a tactical parliamentary error betrayed Karalasingham's orientation, which was not towards revolutionary Marxism, but back towards the LSSP. In an Open Letter for May Day 1966 published in *Shakthi*, Karalasingham argued that a SLFP-LSSP government would be a progressive alternative to the existing UNP regime and would be a step on the path to "a real revolutionary government." Revolutionaries should not fear such a development, he wrote, but "should help the emergence of such a [coalition] government." Spike subjected the article to an exhaustive

critique, explaining that Karalasingham's "sequence of intermediate regimes" was nothing but a sequence of bourgeois governments and represented "a capitulation to the existing level of consciousness of the most backward layers of the anti-UNP masses." In January 1966, the LSSP had joined the SLFP and CP in overtly racist protests and strikes against government legislation for the limited official use of the Tamil language.

17-12. By October 1966, Karalasingham had declared in a polemic against Samarakkody that the split with the LSSP had been a mistake and was advocating for a return to the LSSP. Only Wije Dias and one other *Shakthi* group member voted against Karalasingham's proposal. Others, beguiled by Karalasingham's camouflage of his manoeuvre as an "entry" into the LSSP, initially voted in favour. Rapidly, however, the *Shakthi* group split after its left wing, led by Anura Ekanayake, Keerthi Balasuriya and Nanda Wickremasinghe, established contact with SLL Political Committee member Tony Banda, who was in Sri Lanka at the time. They accepted Banda's advice not to enter the LSSP, were put in contact with Spike and were able to read his documents for the first time. They consolidated a group, including Dias, that systematically studied the documents of the ICFI's struggle against Pabloism in 1953 and 1961–63.

17-13. Initially under the guidance of Tony Banda, the group began publishing *Virodhaya* and intervening in the struggles of the working class. Spike's interventions inside the LSSP (R) served to further clarify the role of Pabloism. During Ernest Mandel's visit to Colombo in February 1967, Spike used a membership meeting to challenge the USec leader. "I make the charge that the leadership of the FI has been directly responsible for the degeneration and ultimate debacle of the LSSP, and moreover, that the degeneration had its origin in the leadership of the FI itself, which included members of the LSSP." Within weeks, at Mandel's instigation, the LSSP (R) launched an "investigation" into a *Young Socialist* editorial written by Spike six months earlier, condemning Castro for his rabid attack on the Fourth International at the Tri-Continental Conference. Spike launched a spirited defence, declaring that LSSP (R) leader Bala Tampoe and the Central Committee were accusing him of "lese-majeste against Fidel Castro for presuming to doubt his revolutionary bone fides and criticise him." In answer he declared: "But I plead in extenuation that I did criticise Castro not as an ordinary individual who is but a cipher in comparison with the 'Great Cuban Leader' but as an individual who is proud to be a member of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution which was founded by Leon Trotsky ... I have dared to criticise Castro for trying to deceive and disorient the international working class and indirectly instigating a witch-hunt of Trotskyists." At the April 1968 LSSP (R) Congress, Spike moved a resolution calling for a complete break from the revisionist politics of the United Secretariat, the dissolution of the Central Committee and the establishment of one that would immediately establish relations with the ICFI. Shortly afterwards, Spike broke from the LSSP (R) and publicly condemned the politics of Pabloism.

17-14. The lessons of the Third Congress of the ICFI in 1966 were critical in the education of the *Virodhaya* group members. The congress took place in the wake of the SWP's reunification, in difficult conditions in which Pabloism had liquidated most sections of the Fourth International. Adapting to this situation, the draft resolution declared that the Fourth International itself had been destroyed and had to be "reconstructed." During the congress, the British SLL insisted that the continuity of the Fourth International had been preserved through the political and theoretical struggle of the ICFI against Pabloism and that the lessons of that struggle were critical to resolving the crisis of revolutionary proletarian leadership. The amended document declared:

"The historical continuity of the Fourth International was ensured by the International Committee, for it alone was able to carry out the theoretical and practical fight against revisionism, indispensable for the building of the revolutionary international." Two groupings—Voix Ouvrière from France and James Robertson's Spartacist tendency from the US—that had been invited to determine whether political collaboration with them was possible, denigrated the struggle against Pabloite opportunism. Robertson flatly opposed "the notion that the present crisis of capitalism is so sharp and deep that Trotskyist revisionism is needed to tame the workers, in a way comparable to the degeneration of the Second and Third Internationals." Robertson declared that this constituted "an enormous overestimation of our present significance", rejecting the lessons of the LSSP's betrayal just two years earlier. He quit the congress and formed the Spartacist tendency, which has always been characterised by its deep hostility to the ICFI.

17-15. The founding congress of the RCL took place on June 16–17, 1968. In the main report to the congress, Balasuriya drew out the crucial lessons of the Third Congress of the ICFI and their significance for the establishment of the RCL. The key issue that emerged during the discussion concerned the continuity of the struggle for Trotskyism. In opposition to a tendency that viewed the congress as the unification of a national Sri Lankan revolutionary current that traced its history through the LSSP, LSSP (R) and *Shakthi* with the ICFI, Balasuriya insisted that the continuity of Trotskyism lay in the ICFI's struggles against Pabloism. The founding of the RCL as a section of the ICFI could only take place on the basis of the lessons of the splits of 1953 and 1961–63 and in a fundamental break from the opportunist politics of the LSSP, LSSP (R) and also the *Shakthi* group.

17-16. The congress unanimously adopted a resolution that declared: "This Congress declares its full agreement with the resolution 'Rebuilding the Fourth International' that was adopted by the Third Congress of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) held in April 1966. This Congress expresses complete faith in the competence of the ICFI, acquired through its consistent struggle for the program and method of the Fourth International, to meet the new challenges of building the Fourth International as the centralised proletarian leadership. This Congress dedicates firmly to the task of building the party of the proletarian revolution in Ceylon as a section of the ICFI in an intransigent struggle against all forms of revisionism and declares that this task is inseparably bound up with active intervention in the class struggle to the maximum possible extent in every place and under all circumstances."

To be continued

Footnotes:

35. *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Four (London: New Park, 1974), p. 225.

36. Gerry Healy, "Ceylon, the Great Betrayal," *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Four, pp. 233–4.

37. "The Newsletter," cited in Y. Ranjith Amarasinghe, *Revolutionary Idealism and Parliamentary Politics* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1998), p. 261.

38. *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume Four, p. 241.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 255.

41. Revolutionary Communist League, "The April Crisis and Party History," internal resolution adopted at the 1972 conference of the RCL, p. 20.



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