

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 8

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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18. The RCL's struggle against petty-bourgeois radicalism

18-1. The founding of the RCL took place at the onset of a wave of revolutionary struggles of the international working class that convulsed much of the world from 1968 to 1975. The tumultuous May–June strike movement in France and the 1968 “Prague Spring” in Czechoslovakia were followed by a succession of upheavals including the 1969 “hot summer” in Italy, the 1974 British miners’ strike that brought down the Heath government and the collapse of the fascist regimes in Portugal and Greece. These struggles were a product of the economic turmoil produced by the end of the post-war boom and the breakup of the Bretton Woods monetary system signalled by the termination of US dollar-gold convertibility in August 1971. The chief role in betraying these revolutionary movements was played by the social democratic, Stalinist and trade union bureaucracies. However, as the ICFI had rightly recognised from the LSSP’s earlier betrayal in 1964, the various Pabloite organisations proved to be a vital secondary prop for capitalism in blocking a political struggle by the working class against the treachery of its old parties and organisations.

18-2. In Sri Lanka, the capitalist class depended directly on the LSSP, which provided the vital “Trotskyist” camouflage for the second Bandaranaike government that took power after a landslide election victory in May 1970 and ruled until its ignominious defeat in 1977. LSSP leaders N.M. Perera, Colvin R. de Silva and Leslie Goonewardene all became ministers. Throughout this period, the LSSP (R) and its various fragments—following their Pabloite counterparts internationally—assisted in propping up the SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition government in the face of mounting working class opposition by promoting, in various guises, a renewal of the United Left Front and the illusion that the LSSP and CP could be pressured to defend workers’ interests.

18-3. In the 1970 election, amid overwhelming hostility in the working

class to the previous UNP government, the RCL called for a critical vote for the SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition. This serious tactical error was criticised by Michael Banda in a letter to the RCL, explaining that the policy was “an unwarranted concession to the reformists and the radical bourgeoisie.” He continued: “Certainly, now the task must be not to open the door for another coalition (how many more coalitions do we need!) but to reject any support to the SLFP and to attempt to free the working class from the capitalist trap by demanding the LSSP-CP leaders to break from the SLFP.”

18-4. The response of Keerthi Balasuriya and the RCL provides a classic example of how a Marxist party makes a principled correction. The party leadership first initiated an exhaustive inner party discussion of Banda’s correspondence and the political implications of the error. In a statement published in July 1970 correcting the error, the RCL explained: “A party capable of taking power can be built only in opposition to the LSSP-CP leaders. Without a struggle against the coalition perspective of the LSSP-CP leaders on the basis of a perspective of a workers’ and peasants’ government, we cannot mobilise the working class independently. To force the Samasamajist and Stalinist leaders to break from the coalition government and the coalition front is the form that the fight for class independence of the working class takes.”

18-5. The RCL’s new tactical orientation was not to encourage illusions in the LSSP and CP but was the political means for exposing their class collaborationist politics as part of the independent mobilisation of the working class and rural masses for the seizure of power. As the Transitional Program of the Fourth International stated: “Of all the parties and organisations which base themselves on the workers and peasants and speak in their name we demand that they break politically from the bourgeoisie and enter upon the road of struggle for a workers’ and farmers’ government. On this road we promise them full support against capitalist reaction. At the same time, we indefatigably develop our agitation around those transitional demands which should in our opinion form the program for a workers’ and farmers’ government’.”[42]

18-6. However, the RCL did not stop at correcting the immediate mistake. As a Marxist, Balasuriya understood that this error had to be the product of considerable political pressures being brought to bear on the party—particularly via the agencies of petty-bourgeois radicalism and opportunism. The RCL statement declared that it was necessary to grasp “the roots of this error because the same hostile class pressure that acted on the RCL can emerge in another form in other circumstances.” In the wake of the discussion, Balasuriya turned to a book-length critique of the party that was the epitome of middle-class radicalism—the JVP. The

program of the JVP drew from the fashionable theories of the day—the peasant guerrillaism of Castroism and Maoism, which were also being promoted by the Pabloites. In subjecting the JVP to detailed critical examination, Balasuriya deepened the class differentiation of the RCL from radical Sinhala populism and from all those parties, including the LSSP and LSSP (R) that adapted to it.

18-7. In the preface to his book, Balasuriya declared: “Many elements, claiming to base themselves on the experiences of Mao Zedong and the Chinese revolution, try to reduce the question of the revolution simply to one of carrying out, in one way or the other, a protracted ‘peoples war’ or some other form of armed struggle. These attempts have nothing in common with Marxist positions on revolution. The question of revolution cannot even be posed without a genuinely objective evaluation of the inter-relationships between the classes and their dynamics ... The Marxist conception that emphasises that the working class cannot come to power by peaceful means has nothing in common with the stupid formula that victory is assured by simply getting armed. Anyone with the slightest respect for the experience of the revolutions where the working class, even though it had arms in hand, was beaten and crushed by the bourgeoisie, will not advocate such conceptions.”[43]

18-8. As Balasuriya explained, the JVP—like Castro, Guevara and Mao—was organically hostile to the working class and rooted in reactionary nationalism. In the JVP’s distorted terminology, the “proletariat” referred to the oppressed layers of the peasantry. The organisation belittled the economic struggles of workers as “struggles for cups of porridge” that distracted from the “patriotic” struggle against imperialism. Modelling itself on Castro, the JVP declared that “an uprising staged by a group of patriots could undermine the power of the ruling class.” Like the Stalinists, the JVP fostered dangerous illusions in the progressive nature of the national bourgeoisie. In what amounted to a repetition of Stalin’s formula for the 1925–27 Chinese revolution, it declared that “anti-imperialist hatred among all social classes” is “pooled together” and “amounts to patriotism.”

18-9. From the outset, the JVP’s propaganda had a communal character: patriotism meant Sinhala patriotism; the anti-imperialist struggle included a fight against “Indian expansionism” and “privileged” Tamil-speaking plantation workers were declared the enemy of Sinhala workers. Balasuriya prophetically warned: “In a period where British imperialism and the Lankan bourgeoisie are driven by their own class interests to devastate the conditions of the plantation workers, petty bourgeois hostility to the same workers turns into a weapon in the hands of monopoly capitalism. This racism is one that leads to fascism. The JVP is creating an anti-working class movement in Lanka which could well be utilised in the future by a fascist movement.” JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera responded to the book’s publication by threatening to hang Balasuriya if the JVP came to power.

18-10. The RCL’s principled correction of its tactical error was the essential preparation for the huge political tests that lay ahead. Within months, the JVP put into practice its theory that “an uprising staged by a group of patriots could undermine the power of the ruling class.” In April 1971, its cadre launched a series of attacks on police stations in the south of the island. The Bandaranaike government, with the full support of the LSSP and CP, responded with a ferocious campaign of state repression. More than 15,000 rural youth were killed by the army and police and over 30,000 detained. A state of emergency was proclaimed and draconian new legislation passed establishing special courts to try the JVP leaders on conspiracy charges.

18-11. Occurring just three years after the formation of the Revolutionary Communist League, the period was a baptism of fire for the RCL. Despite its fundamental political differences with the JVP, the RCL took a principled stand in opposition to the murderous campaign of state repression against the JVP and rural youth. As a result, the government banned the RCL’s publications and the party was forced underground. It continued its political activities in defiance of the emergency regulations and paid a terrible price. Two RCL members—Central Committee member Lakshman Weerakoon and L.G. Gunadasa—were arrested and killed in police custody.

18-12. The RCL, however, was not destroyed by the ordeal, but emerged with its political stature considerably enhanced. In conditions of illegality, it sought to mobilise the working class against the state repression. As restrictions were eased, the RCL conducted an island-wide campaign in defence of the detained rural youth. Based on the fundamental conceptions of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, the party explained to workers that they had a political responsibility to defend the rural masses as part of the process of forging an alliance with the peasantry against the capitalist state. The RCL warned that the attacks on the rural youth foreshadowed attacks on the working class itself. The RCL’s demand to “Free the political prisoners” became one of the slogans raised by workers in the developing strike movement in the mid-1970s. After his release in 1978, JVP leader Wijeweera visited the RCL headquarters to personally thank the party for its campaign.

18-13. One aspect of the RCL’s defence campaign deserves particular mention. The party intervened vigorously to defend the democratic rights of artists threatened under the emergency powers imposed in the wake of the JVP uprising. The RCL’s campaign and its publication of reviews of new drama, cinema and literature attracted a broad audience, especially among youth. The RCL translated Trotsky’s seminal pamphlet, *Culture and Socialism*, and elaborated a Marxist approach to the arts that contradicted the dominant bourgeois ideologies as well as theories based on Stalinist “social realism.” So influential were the RCL’s writings that a leading academic, Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra, felt impelled in 1985 to publicly attack the party’s work. In response, Keerthi Balasuriya, in collaboration with Suchiratha Gamlath, then an RCL Central Committee member, wrote a book elaborating the historical materialist foundations of Marxist literary criticism. Piyaseeli Wijegunasinghe contributed to this theoretical development through many reviews in the party’s press and three books—the last one directed against Professor Gamlath who left the RCL in 1989 and bitterly attacked the party and Marxism.

18-14. The period during and immediately after the April 1971 uprising generated considerable political difficulties inside the party. Several leading RCL members deserted the movement, including Anura Ekanayake who had helped win Balasuriya to Trotskyism. As he had done in relation to the earlier tactical error, Balasuriya responded to the crisis by seeking to clarify its political roots. In order to understand the renegacy of Ekanayake and others, he turned to an examination, from the standpoint of the struggle against Pabloite opportunism, of the history of the RCL and the various layers that had forged it. Like his previous analysis of the JVP, this internal party history was to deepen the RCL’s break from all forms of middle-class radicalism.

18-15. When he went to Britain in 1972, Balasuriya presented an English translation of this analysis, “The April Crisis and Party History,” to SLL leader Gerry Healy and sought his opinion. By 1972, however, the SLL was in the process of abandoning its previous struggle against Pabloism. Far from providing sympathetic advice to the 23-year-old

Trotskyist leader, as would have been the case in the past, Healy dismissed the document, declaring that the RCL needed a perspective not a history. In a letter to an RCL member in Britain, Balasuriya replied to this false counter-position of history to perspective: “This document is not a substitute for a perspectives document, but a precondition for it. We have adopted a perspectives document which we will send you as soon as the translation is completed. But to draft a perspectives document we must first understand our relationship to the past struggles of the working class and of the Marxist movement. Without defining and understanding this relationship it will not be possible to grasp the role we have to play in the coming class battles. This is the importance of history.”[44]

18-16. In a sign of the growing political maturity of the RCL leadership, Balasuriya ignored Healy’s comments and presented two documents—to party history and on perspectives—to the RCL’s 1972 congress. Over the next four years, he deepened the party’s differentiation from the various representatives of Pabloite politics in Sri Lanka—with lengthy series in the RCL’s newspapers against the politics of Samarakkody, Bala Tampoe and one of Samarakkody’s associates, Tulsiri Andradi. Samarakkody broke from LSSP (R) in 1968, and his group joined with the Spartacist tendency, which shared his centrist politics and deep hostility to the ICFI. Under Bala Tampoe, who headed the Ceylon Mercantile Union, the LSSP (R) became an adjunct of his union and a mouthpiece for syndicalism. It, nonetheless, continued to be recognised by USec as its official section in Sri Lanka until 1981.

19. The political degeneration of the British SLL

19-1. The disagreement between Balasuriya and Healy over the significance of the RCL’s history was symptomatic of a broader international process. The new sections of the ICFI—the Workers League in the US, the Bund Sozialistischer Arbeiter in Germany in September 1971 and the Socialist Labour League in Australia in November 1972—were formed on the basis of the lessons of the 1953 and 1961–63 splits. At the same time, however, the SLL was turning away from the principles for which it had previously fought in the 1950s and early 1960s.

19-2. In the aftermath of the ICFI’s Third Congress in 1966, the French section of the ICFI, the Organisation Communiste Internationale (OCI), which had supported the SLL at the time, began raising again the need to “reconstruct” the Fourth International. Behind this phrase was an adaptation by the OCI to centrist outfits that denied the fundamental importance of the ICFI’s struggle against Pabloism. The SLL opposed the OCI, but was coming under similar class pressures. In his 1966 document “Problems of the Fourth International”, Gerry Healy argued that the central task of the SLL was to build a strong political party in Britain that would “inspire” revolutionists to do likewise in other countries around the world. This nationalist conception marked a significant retreat from the internationalism underpinning the building of the Fourth International: that national sections could only be constructed as part of the international struggle of the world party against all forms of national opportunism.

19-3. The SLL’s turn away from the struggle against Pabloism led to a weakening of its defence of Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution. As David North later wrote: “In the late 1960s, [Mike] Banda’s writings on Vietnam, China and the revolutionary movements in the backward countries in general rejected two central tenets of the theory of permanent

revolution: (1) that the democratic revolution in the backward countries can be completed only through the dictatorship of the proletariat, and (2) that the establishment of a socialist society is inconceivable without the worldwide overthrow of capitalism by the international proletariat. Banda’s writings assumed the character of an apology for the colonial bourgeoisie and an acceptance of the Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution.”[45]

19-4. Writing in the *Newsletter* in January 1967, Banda uncritically hailed Mao’s so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, declaring: “The Mao leadership with the support of the Red Guards is fighting against this group under the banner of ‘egalitarianism’. They are fighting against privilege, against autocratic powers, for democracy in China; for the right to criticise and to act on the criticisms; the right to tell the judges, the police and the ministers what the people really think about their policies and to throw them out if they don’t mend their ways.”[46] Mao’s launching of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 had nothing to do with egalitarianism, or for that matter, culture or the proletariat. He had mobilised the Red Guards as part of his factional struggle within the Chinese Communist Party leadership. As soon as workers became involved, most notably with the appearance of an insurrectionary uprising in Shanghai, Mao, who was always fearful of any independent movement of the proletariat, rapidly turned to the military to bring the protest movement under control.

19-5. In an editorial in the *Fourth International* in February 1968 entitled “The Vietnamese Revolution and the Fourth International”, Banda eulogised the “protracted people’s war” being waged by Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and hailed Mao as “the foremost exponent of ‘guerrilla struggle’ today.” The *Virodhaya* group in Sri Lanka wrote to the SLL pointing out that this adulation of Maoism could only mislead workers and youth throughout Asia. The subsequent issue of the *Fourth International* published a small note declaring that the editorial had been the “personal opinion” of Mike Banda, but presented no critique of the views expressed. The SLL’s live-and-let-live attitude to Banda’s pro-Maoist positions marked a serious retreat from the principled defence of the Theory of Permanent Revolution during 1961–63 against the SWP and an adaptation to the glorification of the “armed struggle” of Castro, Mao and Ho Chi Minh by the Pabloites.

19-6. The SLL’s shift away from the Theory of Permanent Revolution was to have a serious impact of the political work of RCL, as a section of the ICFI based in a backward capitalist country. Sharp differences between the SLL and the RCL emerged in 1971 over the Indo-Pakistan war. The SLL published a statement in the name of the IC giving “critical support” to the Indian army intervention into East Pakistan in the name of supporting of the Bangladesh liberation movement. The RCL statement, by contrast, declared that “the task of the proletariat is not that of supporting any one of the warring factions of the bourgeoisie, but that of utilising each and every conflict in the camp of the class enemy for the seizure of power with the perspective of setting up a federated socialist republic which alone would be able to satisfy the social and national aspirations of the millions of toilers in the subcontinent.”[47]

19-7. Still working under conditions of state repression, the RCL only learned of the IC statement proclaiming “critical support” a week after drafting its statement opposing the Indian military intervention. Balasuriya immediately wrote to the ICFI secretary Cliff Slaughter stating: “It is not possible to support the national liberation struggle of the Bengali people and the voluntary unification of India on socialist foundations without opposing the Indo-Pakistan war. Without opposing the war from within India and Pakistan, it is completely absurd to talk about a unified socialist

India which alone can safeguard the right of self-determination of the many nations of the Indian subcontinent.”[48] Balasuriya pointed out that the reason for the Indian military intervention was precisely to suppress a revolutionary struggle to unify East and West Bengal and to uphold the reactionary state system established in 1947–48.

19-8. Having stated the RCL’s firm opposition to the IC stance, Balasuriya accepted the political authority of the ICFI and sought a discussion of the issues involved. After explaining that the RCL had withdrawn its own statement, he wrote: “It need not be stated that it is difficult to defend the IC statement. Nevertheless clarity inside the international is more important than anything else for it is impossible for us to build a national section without fighting to build the international.”[49] Far from opening up an international discussion, however, the SLL did not circulate the RCL’s letter to other sections of the ICFI and increasingly set out to isolate the RCL.

19-9. The SLL’s refusal to discuss the political issues surrounding the Indo-Pakistan war was part of a broader turn away from the program of Trotskyism. In November 1971, the SLL had announced a split with the French OCI, the only other longstanding section of the ICFI. While the SLL’s characterisation of the OCI and its political line as centrist was correct, the SLL made no attempt to clarify the underlying political issues and instead insisted that the split had taken place over “Marxist theory.” David North later wrote: “The precipitous split with the OCI in the autumn of 1971 provided the occasion for [Cliff] Slaughter to argue that ‘the experience of building the revolutionary party in Britain’ had demonstrated ‘that a thoroughgoing and difficult struggle against idealist ways of thinking was necessary which went much deeper than questions of agreement on program and policy’. ... Trotsky had always insisted that the program, through which Marxist theory finds its expression, builds the revolutionary party. But Slaughter, setting theory up against the program, called into question both the validity and viability of the parties produced by the struggle for the Trotskyist program.”[50]

19-10. The SLL’s political backsliding was to be expressed in the transformation of the SLL into the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in November 1973. The WRP was founded without any discussion in the ICFI or any of the necessary programmatic clarification and on the basis of a national tactic orientated to the developing mass anti-Tory movement in Britain. The WRP’s subsequent adaptation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy in Britain was accompanied by a complete abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution and its betrayal of the fundamental principles of Trotskyism.

To be continued

Footnotes:

42. Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977), p. 134.

43. Keerthi Balasuriya, *Politics and the Class Nature of the JVP* (in Sinhalese) December 1970.

44. *Fourth International*, Volume 14, No 1, March 1987, p. 47.

45. *The Heritage We Defend*, p. 423.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 425.

47. *Fourth International*, Volume 14, No. 1, March 1987, p. 37.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

50. David North, *Gerry Healy and his place in the history of the Fourth International*, (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1991), p.58–59.



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