

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 9

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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20. The collapse of the second coalition government

20-1. In the wake of the 1971 JVP uprising, the SLFP-LSSP-CP government confronted a mounting economic and political crisis and responded by widening state repression and inflaming Sinhala communalism. In 1972, Constitutional Affairs Minister Colvin R. de Silva, who in 1956 had opposed the “Sinhala Only” policy, played the central role in devising a new constitution that formally enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhala as the only official language. Discriminatory measures were enacted against Tamils in public sector employment and for university entrance. The Tamil parties—the Federal Party, the All Ceylon Tamil Congress and the main plantation workers’ organisation, the Ceylon Workers’ Congress—bitterly opposed the new constitution and formed the Tamil United Front (TUF), which was transformed in 1975 into the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).

20-2. The oil shocks and global recession of 1973–74 impacted heavily on Sri Lanka. Soaring commodity prices, particularly for oil and food imports, produced an acute foreign exchange crisis. Finance Minister N.M. Perera extended national economic regulation to include strict controls on food imports, a state monopoly of rice transport, and a wage freeze. These policies produced acute economic hardship among the working class and rural masses. In the plantations, unemployment, underemployment and soaring prices led to extreme poverty and hundreds of deaths by starvation. Bandaranaike reacted by accelerating the forced repatriation of plantation workers through an agreement with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1974. Widespread hostility to the coalition government produced a rising tide of working-class militancy.

20-3. The clarification of the RCL’s political line in 1970 proved critical for the party’s interventions in the developing mass movement. Its demand that the LSSP and CP break from the SLFP and fight for a

workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies met up with the sentiments of significant layers of workers who were deeply hostile to the coalition government. The party was able to build significant trade union factions in the Ratmalana railway workshops, the central bank, the government press, the state-owned Thulhiriya textile factory, and, reflecting the RCL’s fight to unify Sinhala and Tamil workers, the Ceynor factory on the Jaffna peninsula.

20-4. As the government’s crisis worsened, Bandaranaike resorted to anti-democratic methods. The SLFP-led government had exploited its overwhelming majority in the 1972 Constituent Assembly to arbitrarily extend its term of office by two years to 1977. It kept in place the state of emergency, imposed during the JVP uprising, and used the emergency regulations to muzzle the press and political opponents. Amid growing differences over economic policy, Bandaranaike dismissed the LSSP ministers in 1975 and began to take the first steps towards opening up the island to foreign investment.

20-5. The period from the expulsion of the LSSP from the government in September 1975 to its devastating electoral defeat in July 1977 was one of acute political crisis for the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie—part of the revolutionary upheavals that had taken place internationally since 1968. Bandaranaike’s austerity policies produced a mounting strike wave in which the RCL played an increasingly prominent role. Concerned at the RCL’s influence, the government publicly attacked the party in parliament. The climax came in late 1976. In November, widespread student demonstrations over the shooting of a student at Peradeniya university were joined by tens of thousands of workers. From December 1976, a general strike movement began with a stoppage in the Ratmalana railway workshops that quickly spread throughout the railways. The government banned the strike but this only fuelled further stoppages by other public sector workers. For weeks, the fate of the Bandaranaike government hung in the balance.

20-6. The survival of bourgeois rule in the face of this determined offensive by the working class rested on the LSSP, CP and LSSP (R) leaders who blocked any development of the mass movement into a struggle for power. The CP remained in the government and supported police state measures against strikers, only leaving the ruling coalition in February 1977 after the strikes were crushed. The LSSP leaders declared that the strike movement was “non-political” and refused to support the striking workers or make any call for the bringing down of the Bandaranaike government. The Ceylon Mercantile Union, under LSSP (R) leader Bala Tampoe, refused to take part in the strike and opposed the RCL’s efforts to mobilise CMU members.

20-7. The LSSP (R) and its various breakaway groups played the critical role in attacking the RCL's demand for the LSSP and CP to fight for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies. Tulsiri Andradi criticised the RCL for creating illusions in the reformist parties—the LSSP and the CP—by demanding they take power. The RCL's demand, however, was not aimed at promoting these parties, but rather at breaking their grip over socialist-minded layers of the working class who still grudgingly looked to the LSSP and CP for leadership. Andradi's left-sounding denunciation was in fact an evasion of the essential political task of exposing the LSSP and CP and thus left workers in the hands of these parties. The betrayal of this mass movement by the LSSP, CP and LSSP (R) paved the way for the UNP to return to power. At the July 1977 election, the coalition parties suffered a crushing defeat: the UNP won 140 of the 168 seats, the SLFP retained just 8 seats, and the LSSP and CP lost all their seats.

20-8. As the RCL was deepening its political fight against the old leaderships in the Sri Lankan working class, the WRP was turning away from such a struggle in Britain. The bringing down of the Heath government in Britain in 1974 as the result of a determined strike by British miners led to a minority Labour government. Having founded the party the year before on little more than militant working-class anti-Toryism, the WRP faced a political crisis and the loss of hundreds of members as it now confronted the need to combat residual illusions of workers in social democracy. These illusions were articulated by an unprincipled, right-wing faction headed by Alan Thornett, a Central Committee member and leading trade unionist. It argued that the Labour government would come into conflict with the bourgeoisie. Rather than carry out a struggle to clarify the class nature of Labourism for its members and through them the working class, the WRP expelled the Thornett group without political discussion. The WRP's abandonment of the patient fight to politically educate workers was signalled by its call in July 1975 for the bringing down of the Labour government in conditions where the Labour Party still had the allegiance of most workers and the revolutionary party was in no position to offer an alternative. Behind this left-sounding ultimatum, the WRP was relinquishing the political struggle against the Labour leadership and adapting to a section of the trade union bureaucracy.

20-9. The WRP also attempted to foist a similar stance on the RCL. In a letter to Balasuriya in September 1975, Mike Banda declared: "I am afraid that the propagandist tail is wagging the Marxist dog again. This is reflected in your press where a lot of space is given to exposing the revisionists (correctly) but not enough is being done to develop, to concretise the abstractions—through a struggle for power." Banda called on the RCL to drop its demands on the LSSP and CP, warning that the party would "end up capitulating to the centrists", and to call for the bringing down of the SLFP government. The RCL persisted with its exposure of the LSSP and CP through the demand that they fight for a workers' government. Moreover, the RCL's so-called "propagandism"—Balasuriya's polemics against the various Pabloite groups, including his book-length reply to Andradi in 1975 entitled: *In Defence of the Fourth International: A Reply to an anti-Trotskyist Charlatan*—were the essential preparation for the RCL's intervention into the working class.

20-10. The upheavals of 1975–77 proved to be a decisive political test. Based on the 1970 clarification of its political line, the RCL emerged with its standing greatly enhanced among class conscious workers. It had been the only party that fought to mobilise the working class against the Bandaranaike government on a socialist program. All the fragments of the LSSP (R) led by Bala Tampoe, Samarakkody and Andradi had been found

wanting and would all but vanish from Sri Lankan politics in the next few years. Their place was taken by the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) formed in 1978 by ex-LSSP members. The NSSP founders had supported the 1964 betrayal, the second coalition government and its communal policies, remained in the LSSP throughout the strike wave and only left after the 1977 electoral rout. The NSSP, as its name implied, was simply the old opportunist Samasamajism with a new face. It continued the LSSP's politics of class collaboration and coalitionism, and, quite appropriately, became the Sri Lankan section of the Pabloite United Secretariat in 1981.

20-11. The rise and fall of the Bandaranaike government in Sri Lanka found striking parallels elsewhere in South Asia. In the midst of the economic crisis of the 1970s, the governments of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in Pakistan and Indira Gandhi in India sought to bind the working class and oppressed toilers to the bourgeoisie through pseudo-socialist rhetoric and populist nationalism. Both governments initially enacted very limited reforms then came into headlong collision with the working class and turned to authoritarian methods to suppress dissent. In Pakistan and India, the various Stalinist parties played the critical role in preventing the working class from challenging these supposedly left regimes, thereby enabling the bourgeoisie to regain the initiative. In the space of five months in 1977, Bhutto, Gandhi and Bandaranaike all fell from power. Bourgeois politics then shifted sharply right, although in the case of Indira Gandhi, she herself came to embody this shift when restored to power in 1980. In Pakistan, Bhutto was ousted in an army coup led by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq and encouraged by Washington. Bhutto, Gandhi and Bandaranaike left a reactionary legacy—their "left" populism, laden as it was with chauvinism, and appeals to national and religio-communal identities, sowed the seeds for a qualitative escalation of ethno-communalist politics across South Asia in the 1980s.

21. The UNP government and the descent into war

21-1. The advent of the UNP government in Sri Lanka was part of broader global economic and political processes. Following the defeat of the wave of revolutionary struggles in the period of 1968–1975, the ruling classes launched a counteroffensive against the working class, marked politically by the coming to power of the Thatcher government in Britain in 1979 and the Reagan administration in the US in 1980. The following year Reagan, with the complicity of the AFL-CIO, smashed the PATCO strike by dismissing 11,000 air traffic controllers. Monetarist, pro-market policies replaced Keynesian economic regulation as the new benchmark for governments around the world. Beginning in East and South East Asia, a turn was made towards the creation of cheap labour platforms. Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan, which were to become the "Asian Tigers" of the 1980s, all offered incentives to foreign investors to take advantage of their low-wage labour. In China, Deng Xiaoping announced his openly pro-market program in 1978.

21-2. In adopting these policies in Sri Lanka, the UNP government drew definite conclusions from the 1975–77 upheaval provoked by Bandaranaike's tentative turn to a free market agenda. As he began to encourage foreign investment, cut social spending and carry out privatisations, Prime Minister J.R. Jayewardene prepared for war against the working class by strengthening the state apparatus and raising communal tensions to fever pitch to shore up his own social base and

divide working people. In 1978, the UNP used its overwhelming parliamentary majority to rewrite the constitution, establishing an executive presidency with sweeping anti-democratic powers, and to install Jayewardene as president. In July 1979, the government rammed through the Prevention of Terrorism Act giving the police powers of arrest and imprisonment without trial.

21-3. While the UNP had promised during the election campaign to address Tamil grievances, Jayewardene rapidly turned to anti-Tamil racialism. In 1976, the TULF had adopted the Vaddukodai resolution calling for a separate Tamil state of Eelam consisting of the northern and eastern provinces of the island. Anger among Tamil youth over the discrimination they faced had led to the formation of various small armed groups. Jayewardene used a minor attack on police in August 1977 to order the army into Jaffna and encouraged a vicious pogrom elsewhere. The government denounced the TULF, which insisted that its electoral successes gave it a mandate to negotiate a separate Eelam. In parliament, the prime minister provocatively declared: "If you want a fight, there will be a fight." Jayewardene had set the pattern for the rapid descent into civil war. At each stage, the UNP exploited isolated attacks on police to respond with massive state repression and pogroms against the Tamil minority.

21-4. The RCL consistently campaigned for the withdrawal of the security forces from the North and East and to unite the working class. The party insisted that the proletariat was the only social force capable of resolving the outstanding democratic tasks and preventing a rapid slide into civil war. In the climate of communal reaction created by the UNP and supported by the SLFP, LSSP and CP, the RCL's stand required considerable courage. In 1979, leading RCL member R.P. Piyadasa was brutally murdered for opposing the government's policies by UNP-organised thugs working with the police.

21-5. Opposition to the UNP government's program of privatisation and restructuring reached a high point in July 1980 when a broad general strike movement for higher pay erupted. President Jayewardene immediately declared the strike illegal and threatened to sack anyone who joined it. The LSSP and CP declared the strike "non-political" and refused to challenge the UNP government's emergency powers or to call for it to be brought down. LSSP (R) leader Bala Tampoe did not call his CMU out on strike. The NSSP declared that the strike was simply a pay dispute and bitterly attacked the RCL campaign to transform it into a political movement against the government. As a result of the treachery of these leaderships, the UNP government was able to sack 100,000 public sector workers virtually unopposed, thereby inflicting a devastating defeat on the working class.

21-6. The defeat of the 1980 General Strike—the last major strike by the Sri Lankan working class—opened the door to full-scale civil war. The UNP's response to any political challenge or crisis was to resort to anti-Tamil provocations that culminated in horrific pogroms in July 1983. After the killing of 13 soldiers by Tamil militants, the UNP government deliberately inflamed communal sentiment by bringing the bodies to Colombo. The following day anti-Tamil violence, in which UNP thugs were prominent, erupted throughout much of the island and on an unprecedented scale. The homes and shops of Tamils were torched and hundreds of people were killed. The government and police allowed the rampage to continue unimpeded for four days and imposed draconian censorship to block any news.

21-7. The murderous pogrom marked the beginning of a full-scale civil war that was to devastate the country for the next quarter of a century. On

August 4, in what amounted to a declaration of war, the UNP government rammed through a constitutional change—the sixth amendment—banning the advocacy of a separate Eelam and imposing a loyalty oath on all public servants. For refusing to take this oath, all TULF parliamentarians lost their seats. By December 1983, the Jaffna peninsula had been declared a "war zone." Outraged by the actions of the UNP government, Tamil youth in their thousands flocked to join the ranks of the various armed Tamil groups.

21-8. In the course of the pogrom, the RCL was targeted for particular attack. The home of *Kamkaru Mavatha* editor K. Ratnayake was burned to the ground and an attempt to destroy the party print shop was narrowly averted. The RCL defied government censorship. It published a lengthy statement indicting the government and opposition parties and calling on the working class to come to the defence of Tamils. The RCL opposed the war, exposed the complicity of the LSSP, CP and the Indian government, and demanded the withdrawal of the military from the North and East. In May 1984, Ananda Wakkumbura, who was legally responsible for the RCL newspapers, was arrested for violating the sixth amendment and held by police for two weeks. Confronted by a vigorous RCL campaign, the government backed away from prosecuting Wakkumbura.

22. The RCL, the WRP and the national question

22-1. The RCL's stance on the national question had, since its inception, been based on the principles of proletarian internationalism as developed through Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. The party consistently fought against all forms of nationalism, communalism and racism in order to unite workers on a class basis. It courageously opposed the increasingly blatant forms of official communal discrimination against Tamils and defended their democratic rights. As early as 1970, the RCL called for the withdrawal of troops sent to the island's North and would continue to do so throughout the war. Apart from the Tamil bourgeois parties, the RCL was alone in opposing the chauvinist 1972 constitution. When the RCL faction in the government press union proposed a motion, which was passed, opposing the constitution, LSSP officials carried out a witch-hunt against party supporters.

22-2. Amid the growing radicalisation of Tamil youth, the RCL declared in June 1972: "We Marxists recognise the right of the Tamil nation to self-determination. At the same time, we emphasise that this right can only be won by mobilising the Sinhalese and Tamil workers for the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies and recognising this very same right." [51] In line with Lenin's writings on the national question, the RCL was not advocating a separate Tamil state, but rather defending the right of Tamils to do so. The policy was a means of exposing the duplicity of bourgeois Tamil politicians and winning Tamil workers and youth to a socialist perspective for Sri Lanka and the Indian subcontinent as a whole.

22-3. However, at a meeting of the ICFI in 1972, the SLL leadership vehemently opposed the RCL's stance. Banda argued that support for the Tamils' right to self-determination would help the plans of the imperialists to carve up the island. Like his support for the Indian military intervention in East Pakistan in 1971, Banda's opposition to the RCL was based on accepting the legitimacy of the so-called independent nation states established by imperialism in South Asia in 1947–48. Balasuriya

later explained: “The position of the WRP inexorably leads to complete capitulation to the national bourgeoisie and through it to imperialism because its theory was based entirely on the supposed necessity to keep these bourgeois states intact. And since these state structures, without exception, are based on the domination of one nationality—whose bourgeoisie, allied with imperialism, uses brute force to keep the other nationalities in subjugation—the defence of these state structures amounts to the defence of imperialism itself.”[52]

22-4. At that stage, as the Tamil struggle was only in incipient form, the RCL reluctantly bowed to the experience and political authority of the SLL leadership. The RCL continued to staunchly defend the democratic rights of Tamils and fight for the unity of Tamil and Sinhala workers but was hampered by the fact that it was working throughout most of the 1970s without an important tactical weapon. The party had to combat the growing influence of Maoists, whose advocacy of the “armed struggle” was attractive to the radicalised Tamil youth who were hostile to the TULF’s Gandhian tactics. Like the JVP, the Maoists pointed to the treachery of the LSSP ministers in the Bandaranaike government to denounce Trotskyism. Prior to 1977, however, these armed Tamil groups had marginal political significance and were completely sidelined by the preceding mass movement of the working class that drew support from Sinhala and Tamil workers on a class basis.

22-5. In 1979, as the Tamil national liberation struggle achieved international prominence, the WRP made a 180-degree turn. Banda sent a letter of apology to the RCL admitting that the WRP had ignored the importance of the national question in Sri Lanka, but provided no explanation in the letter or subsequently for its belated advocacy of the right to self-determination for Tamils. The WRP’s new line on Sri Lanka was no more based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution than its previous one. It had flipped from opposition to the Tamil national liberation struggle to an uncritical embrace. The WRP’s about-face was bound up with the shift in its class axis following the politically unclarified split with Thornett in 1974. In 1976, as the WRP encountered new political problems associated with the international counteroffensive of the bourgeoisie, it began to turn to other class forces for support—to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy in Britain and to Arab bourgeois regimes in the Middle East.

22-6. In parallel with its unprincipled relations with the Arab bourgeoisie, the WRP established connections with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE was one of the more prominent armed Tamil groups, which included the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the Eelam People’s Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS) and later the People’s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). All of the groups had been influenced to one degree or another by Stalinism and Maoism and, like the TULF, declared that their objective was a socialist Tamil Eelam. The WRP assisted the LTTE’s so-called theoretician Anton Balasingham in providing a more sophisticated “socialist” window-dressing for what was a bourgeois program of “national liberation.”

22-7. In 1979 the WRP published Balasingham’s “On the Tamil national question” in its *Labour Review* and insisted that the RCL do the same. In the hands of Balasingham, Lenin’s writings on the national question in 1913 were turned inside out. Whilst Lenin had insisted that for Marxists the most important consideration in the national question was “the self-determination of the working class,” Balasingham argued that Lenin required Marxists to be uncritical supporters of the separatist aspirations of the Tamil bourgeoisie. The task of the proletarian revolutionary, he declared, was “to support the [Tamil] struggle though it

is headed by the bourgeoisie and adopt a strategy to advance the struggle towards national liberation and socialist revolution.” Balasingham’s reference to the “socialist revolution”, devoid of any struggle to unify and mobilise workers independently of the bourgeoisie, was purely decorative. In a 1980 polemic entitled “Towards a Socialist Tamil Eelam”, the LTTE explicitly rejected any turn to the working class, declaring: “Tamil people have had enough of the rotten ideology of unity of the working class and an all-Sri Lankan revolution. A national minority that is under the oppressive clutches of the majority must first fight for its liberation.”

22-8. The RCL continued to fight intransigently to unite Sinhala and Tamil workers around their common class interests. The party carried out extensive campaigns to defend the democratic rights of Tamils and to expose the UNP’s involvement in the 1983 pogroms. But the WRP’s uncritical support for the LTTE prevented any examination by the RCL of the politics of the LTTE and other Tamil armed groups and thus helped to strengthen their influence among Tamil youth. It was only in the aftermath of the 1985-87 split with the WRP that the RCL and the ICFI could re-examine the national question, especially in relation to the experiences of the working class in Sri Lanka.

22-9. The 1983 anti-Tamil pogroms produced a wave of revulsion in India, especially in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi offered to broker peace talks. At the same time, the Indian government covertly authorised military training to the various armed Tamil organisations both to exert control over their activities and to use them as a bargaining chip in its dealings with the Sri Lankan government. All of the Tamil groups promoted illusions in the Indian bourgeoisie as the defenders of Tamils and encouraged greater direct Indian intervention, as had been done in Bangladesh. The Indian Stalinist parties—the CPI and CPM—were directly involved in the Indian government’s machinations, providing “political training” to the Tamil youth under the supervision of Indian intelligence. The exception was the LTTE. It maintained somewhat more distance from the Indian government, but only so as to move more directly into the camp of the regional Tamil bourgeoisie in India and the Sri Lankan Tamil bourgeoisie. The LTTE maintained close ties with Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran and his bourgeois All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), which used the LTTE connection to bolster its own political image. Concerned not to disturb its relations with the LTTE, the WRP opposed the RCL’s efforts to develop the fight for Trotskyism in Tamil Nadu and India.

22-10. During 1983–85, the WRP consciously sought to politically destroy the Sri Lankan section as part of its broader attacks on the International Committee. At the height of the anti-Tamil pogrom in July 1983, the *News Line* published a comment written by Banda that declared: “It is possible and even probable, that the police and the army have used the arbitrary and uncontrolled power granted to them under the emergency laws to kill our comrades and destroy our press.” Writing later, Keerthi Balasuriya denounced the WRP’s callous indifference to the fate of the RCL, explaining: “You did absolutely nothing to mount a campaign in our defence and thus gave advance notice to the UNP government that you will not even lift a finger in the event of the physical destruction of our party. Throughout that period, the RCL defended itself and won the respect of many sections of the working class and the youth, only because we never retreated from the theoretical and political foundations of the ICFI, the world Trotskyist movement. It is precisely this fact which made our party a constant target of political provocation by Healy, Banda and Slaughter.”[53]

22-11. While uncritically supporting the LTTE, the WRP had no

compunction about maintaining political relations with a group who had split from the RCL and was attacking it in Sinhala chauvinist terms. The WRP pressed the RCL for a reconciliation with these renegades, which failed, and continued to use their malicious gossip to undermine the RCL. On the basis of the group's "reports", Healy and Banda moved for the expulsion of the RCL from the ICFI at its Tenth Congress in 1985. While the expulsion was never carried out, the WRP leaders were clearly out to destroy the RCL and the IC.

To be continued

Footnotes:

51. *Fourth International*, Volume 14, No. 1, March 1987, p.54.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.

53. *Fourth International*, Volume 14, No. 2, June 1987, p. 111.



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