

Thirty years since the start of Sri Lanka's civil war

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The last week of July marked 30 years since the island-wide pogrom against Tamils in Sri Lanka that triggered 26 years of communal war, which ended in May 2009 with the military defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The terrible conflict that cost more than 100,000 lives—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—is a crucial strategic experience for the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. It contains vital political lessons for workers and youth.

Various articles in the Sri Lankan press on the 30th anniversary describe the 1983 July carnage as a “tragic incident,” a “crime against Tamils” and a “national shame.” But none provide an explanation of why the rampage took place—either declaring it to be inexplicable, or falsely attributing it to ancient communal animosities. They all cover up the real cause, which lies in the reactionary communal politics on which the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has relied to divide the working class and cement its rule since formal independence in 1948.

July 1983 was a qualitative turning point. In the week beginning July 24, Sinhala chauvinist thugs, with the support of the police and military, unleashed a reign of terror against Tamils in Colombo that rapidly spread to other cities and villages. Over 1,000 Tamils were killed, many more were injured and more than 100,000 fled either to the predominantly Tamil north of the island or overseas. Houses and businesses owned by Tamils, including small tea shops and roadside stalls, were burned down. Tamil patients in hospitals were not spared. More than 50 Tamil political prisoners were murdered by Sinhala inmates at the instigation of prison officers.

President J.R. Jayawardene justified the murderous attacks as an expression of the anger of Sinhalese over the ambush and killing of 13 soldiers by the LTTE. The claim was an utter lie. The United National Party (UNP) government deliberately provoked the carnage by bringing the bodies of the dead soldiers to Colombo for public burial, and UNP thugs were prominent in the violence. The majority of ordinary Sinhalese were horrified at the atrocities that followed and some risked their lives to save their Tamil friends and neighbours.

Jayawardene seized on the pogrom as a pretext to launch a full-scale war on the Tamil population. On August 4, the

government rammed through a constitutional change outlawing any advocacy of a separate Tamil state of Eelam and requiring a loyalty oath of all public sector workers. For refusing to take the oath, all Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) parliamentarians were stripped of their seats. By December, the government declared the entire northern Jaffna Peninsula to be a war zone and placed it under military occupation. Outraged at the actions of the UNP government, Tamil youth flooded into what had previously been relatively small, armed Tamil separatist groups, such as the LTTE.

While the island's Tamil minority was the immediate target, the war stemmed from the government's efforts to break the resistance of the working class to its sweeping pro-market agenda. After coming to power in 1977, the UNP government was one of the first in the world to abandon the program of national economic regulation and embrace free market restructuring. It sought to transform the island into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors.

Despite determined opposition by the working class, Jayawardene ruthlessly imposed his program of privatisation and the slashing of jobs, wages, price subsidies and essential services. When the public employees initiated an island-wide general strike in July 1980 to defend their wages and conditions, the government sacked 100,000. Due to the treachery of the trade unions, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the outcome was a devastating defeat for the working class.

The government's escalating assault on the working class went hand-in-hand with provocations against Tamils and a resort to anti-democratic methods of rule, including the use of emergency powers. In 1981, Sinhala thugs brought from Colombo destroyed culturally valuable statues and burnt down the Jaffna Library, including irreplaceable Tamil manuscripts. The pogrom in July 1983 was the culmination of these processes.

While the UNP was responsible for starting the war, its roots lay in the political weakness of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, which, from the outset of formal independence in 1948, confronted an insurgent working class and a revolutionary party. The Trotskyist Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI)

alone had opposed British colonial rule and the “fake independence” granted from London.

One of the first actions of the UNP government in 1948 was to strip citizenship rights from around one million Tamil-speaking plantation workers. BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva condemned the citizenship bill, declaring it was based on the principle of fascism that “the state must be coeval with the nation and the nation with the race” and warning that it would inevitably lead to conflict.

The domination of communal politics was not inevitable, but was bound up with the liquidation of the BLPI into the LSSP in 1950 and the LSSP’s subsequent political backsliding. The LSSP increasingly adapted to the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) and its overtly communal policies, such as the use of Sinhala as the country’s only official language. In 1964, the LSSP completely abandoned any adherence to socialist internationalism and joined the bourgeois SLFP government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike.

The LSSP’s betrayal marked a fundamental turning point in Sri Lankan politics. In the South, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), based on a mixture of Sinhala populism and Maoism, exploited the resultant confusion among workers and young people to establish a base among unemployed rural Sinhala youth. In the North, after the SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition government imposed a new constitution in 1972 discriminating against Tamils, young Tamils began to look to armed separatist groups, including the LTTE.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, was the only party to fight for the unity of workers and youth—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim. The RCL/SEP intransigently opposed all forms of nationalism and communalism, defended the democratic rights of Tamils, and, from the outset of the war, demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the North and East.

The 26-year conflict is not only an indictment of successive Colombo governments, which were responsible for the war and the military’s crimes, but also of the political perspective of Tamil separatism. The LTTE, which emerged as the dominant armed group after ruthlessly suppressing its rivals, was never oriented to the working class. Its program of a separate Tamil state of Eelam represented the class interests of the venal Tamil bourgeoisie and was always based on seeking support from India and other powers.

However, New Delhi, concerned that the Sri Lankan war would trigger separatist movements in India, struck a deal with the UNP government—the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord—to dispatch Indian “peacekeepers” to disarm the LTTE. All the Tamil parties, including the LTTE, supported the Accord, which promised a limited devolution of powers at the provincial level. The UNP exploited the resulting breathing space to suppress resistance in the South to its policies, then resumed the war.

The LTTE’s military defeat in May 2009 was the product of its bankrupt political outlook. It bitterly opposed any struggle to

unite Sinhala and Tamil workers on a class basis, blaming the “Sinhala people” as a whole for the crimes of the Colombo government. Its indiscriminate attacks on Sinhala civilians played directly into the hands of the Colombo establishment and only deepened the communal divide. In areas under its control, the LTTE’s arbitrary and anti-democratic methods of rule alienated the Tamil masses.

Organically incapable of making any appeal to the working class and oppressed masses in Sri Lanka, let alone South Asia or internationally, the LTTE was reduced to making futile appeals to the “international community”—that is, to the US, India and other powers that were backing the Colombo government—as the Sri Lankan military closed the noose around its fighters.

The end of the war has not brought peace or prosperity. Under President Mahinda Rajapakse, the current SLFP-led government has maintained the vast police-state apparatus built up during the war and the military has entrenched its occupation of the North and East of the island. Just as the UNP government whipped up anti-Tamil communalism in 1983 to divide the working class as it implemented its pro-market policies, so the Rajapakse government is stirring up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism as it imposes International Monetary Fund’s austerity agenda amid the worst global capitalist breakdown since the 1930s.

The program fought for by the RCL/SEP throughout the past 30 years has a burning relevance today. The war demonstrated the truth of Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution—the inability of any of section of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie to ensure basic democratic rights and decent living standards for working people. The only way for the working class to defend its class interests is through the rejection of all forms of nationalism and chauvinism and a unified struggle on the basis of socialist internationalism. That means a political struggle to mobilise the working class independently of all factions of the ruling class in the fight for the SEP’s perspective of a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.



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