

# Fifty years since the LSSP's Great Betrayal in Sri Lanka

## Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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Today is 50 years since the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) formally joined the ruling coalition led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike. For the first time a party claiming to be Trotskyist entered a bourgeois government—a historic betrayal that had far reaching consequences for the international working class.

The LSSP accepted three cabinet positions with LSSP leader N.M. Perera taking the key post of finance minister. Just days before, 501 delegates voted at a special LSSP congress in favour of Perera's resolution to join the ruling coalition. A minority of 159 delegates opposed the motion and split immediately to form the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Revolutionary) or LSSP (R).

The LSSP was called into the coalition to suppress the growing radicalisation of the working class expressed a rising tide of strikes and the establishment of the 21 demands movement in September 1963. International concern over the developing political crisis in Colombo was such that US President John F. Kennedy met Sri Lankan parliamentary representatives, including Perera, in the same month.

Bandaranaike was acutely conscious of the dangers posed to bourgeois rule in Sri Lanka, declaring in parliament in March 1964 that she had been urged from various quarters to establish a dictatorship and to force workers back to work at bayonet point, or alternatively to form a government of national unity. "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," she declared.

Having entered the government, the LSSP called off the 21 demands movement, generating great confusion and political disorientation in the working class. It was only possible to understand the political roots of the LSSP's betrayal based on the lessons of the struggle waged by International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) against the opportunist tendency known as Pabloism.

In a statement issued in July 1964, the ICFI explained the international significance of LSSP's treachery: "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 to imperialism, in the preparation of a defeat for the working class that revisionism in the world Trotskyist movement has found its expression."

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—the predecessor

of Socialist Equality Party (SEP)—was formed in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in opposition to the Pabloite politics that had underpinned the LSSP's political backsliding.

Every other political tendency that emerged from the LSSP's betrayal has either disintegrated, such as the LSSP (R), or is now part of the Colombo political establishment. The LSSP today is a minor faction in the autocratic government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. The pseudo-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—broke from the LSSP, but not its politics of class collaboration, and are today in a de facto alliance with the right wing United National Party (UNP).

It is essential for workers and young people, not only in Sri Lanka, but throughout Asia and internationally to understand why the LSSP betrayed the principles of Trotskyism and the political consequences. Only on that basis is it possible to build a revolutionary movement of the international working class against the growing dangers of war and social counter-revolution.

Gerry Healy, leader of the British Socialist Labour League (SLL), who came to Colombo in June 1964 to intervene on behalf of the ICFI, explained: "The answer [to the question of the LSSP's degeneration] lies not in Ceylon, but in an international study of Pabloite revisionism. The real architects of the coalition reside in Paris."

The opportunist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel emerged within the Fourth International in the wake of World War II and under the pressure of the post-war restabilisation of world capitalism. As the Cold War developed, Pablo declared that a new "objective reality" had come about that "consists essentially of the capitalist regimes and the Stalinist world" and attributed a historical progressive role to Stalinist bureaucracies, thus rejecting Trotsky's characterisation of their counterrevolutionary nature.

Pabloism rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity of building of independent Trotskyist parties. Instead it proposed the liquidation of the sections of the Fourth International into various bourgeois agencies within the workers' movement—Stalinism, Social Democracy and, within countries like Sri Lanka, bourgeois nationalist tendencies.

The ICFI was formed in opposition to Pabloite opportunism. James P. Cannon, the leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the US, issued an open letter in November 1953 reasserting the fundamental principles of orthodox Trotskyism.

These international processes took a particularly sharp expression in Sri Lanka. Under the influence of Pablo, the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI)—formed in 1942 as the section of the Fourth International throughout the Indian subcontinent—liquidated its Sri Lankan component into the LSSP in 1950. Even though the LSSP leaders had criticised Pablo’s pro-Stalinist stance, they rejected Cannon’s letter in 1953, refused to join the ICFI and remained with the Pabloite International Secretariat (IS).

Pablo and Mandel bore direct responsibility for the LSSP’s political backsliding and increasingly explicit adaption to the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) which combined anti-imperialist phrase-mongering with reactionary Sinhala supremacism. The LSSP’s promotion of the SLFP as a progressive alternative represented an abandonment of Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution which established that in countries of a belated capitalist development such as Sri Lanka, no faction of the bourgeoisie was capable of carrying out the basic democratic tasks.

The SLFP won the 1956 election on the basis of a vile campaign of “Sinhala only” as the country’s official language—a policy that relegated the island’s Tamil minority to second-class citizens. While the LSSP opposed the Sinhala only policy, it nevertheless entered into a “no contest” electoral pact with the SLFP and after the election adopted a stance of “responsive cooperation” towards the new SLFP government.

None of this was opposed by Pablo and Mandel. Moreover, LSSP’s degeneration was further boosted by the retreat by Cannon and the SWP from their principled stance in 1953. In June 1963, the SWP reunified with the Pabloite international without any discussion of the fundamental differences. The newly established United Secretariat (USec), which glorified the Castro regime in Cuba, actively encouraged the LSSP’s embrace of a similar bourgeois nationalist formation in Sri Lanka.

In the wake of the reunification and with the USec’s encouragement, the LSSP took the initiative in forming the United Left Front (ULF) with the Stalinist Communist Party and the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), a Sinhala chauvinist party that had joined the SLFP government in 1956. The ULF front was the spring-board for the LSSP to take the political plunge into the government of Bandaranaike in 1964.

The LSSP’s betrayal was a blow to the working class throughout the region and internationally. In Sri Lanka, its abandonment of socialist internationalism opened the door for the formation of various forms of petty-bourgeois radicalism based on communal politics. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) formed in 1966 won a following among impoverished rural Sinhala youth by preaching the armed struggle on the basis of a mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism.

In 1971, the JVP launched an armed rebellion against the second SLFP coalition government with the LSSP and CP formed in 1970. The government’s response was two-fold: a ruthless suppression of the uprising involving the slaughter of 15,000 rural youth, and, in a bid to undermine the JVP, the imposition of policies biased in favour of Sinhalese against Tamils. The 1972 constitution enshrined the Sinhala only language policy and Buddhism as the

state religion. This anti-Tamil discrimination provoked the formation of armed Tamil separatist organisations such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, setting the island on the road to three decades of bloody civil war that cost hundreds of thousands of lives.

Throughout Asia and around the world, the LSSP’s betrayal gave a political boost to increasingly discredited Stalinist and Maoist parties. In India, the various Stalinist parties—Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist)—were able to survive the crisis of the Sino-Soviet split unchallenged. The armed Naxalbari movement denounced Trotskyism by pointing to the LSSP, even though, like all Stalinist organisations, it advocated its own alliance with the “progressive” bourgeoisie.

The LSSP’s betrayal confirmed correctness of the SLL’s political struggle against the SWP’s reunification with the Pabloites. Moreover, a group of ICFI sympathisers inside the SWP fought for an internal discussion of the LSSP’s entry into the Bandaranaike government. Their expulsion led to the formation of the Workers League in 1966, the forerunner of the SEP (US).

While it had correctly concluded that the LSSP’s betrayal marked the entry of Pabloite revisionism into the direct service of imperialism, the SLL and its successor, the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), increasingly turned away from the international struggle against opportunism and adapted to the Labour and union bureaucracies in Britain, Stalinism and bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East.

In 1985–86, the genuine Trotskyists within the ICFI split from the WRP opportunists, bringing to an end a civil war that had raged within the Fourth International for more than three decades. The split created the conditions for a flowering of Marxism within the ICFI and the unprecedented international integration of its work which is expressed on the World Socialist Web Site.

Today the gulf between the ICFI and all pseudo-left tendencies—both Pabloite and state-capitalist—is immense. Their passage into the service of imperialism is marked by their open support for the US-led war on Libya and regime-change operation in Syria as well as for the Washington-backed fascist-led coup in Ukraine and confrontation with Russia. The ICFI is alone in campaigning to unify and mobilise the international working class on the basis of a socialist perspective against the growing danger of war. The lessons of the ICFI’s struggle against all forms of opportunism are crucial to the fight to build such an anti-war movement.

The SEP, along with its co-thinkers in the ICFI, will mark the 50th anniversary of the LSSP’s betrayal by explaining its significance through articles, meetings and lectures. It is vital to bring an understanding of this critical strategic experience to a new generation of workers, youth and socialist-minded intellectuals in the fight to expand the influence of the ICFI and build new sections in Asia and around the world.



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