

The LSSP's Great Betrayal: Part 3

LSSP enters capitalist coalition government in Sri Lanka.

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This is the third of four articles on the political lessons of great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which in June 1964 joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike. For the first time, a party claiming to be Trotskyist entered into a bourgeois government—an open repudiation of the fundamental principles of international socialism.

The LSSP's betrayal had a profound significance for the international Trotskyist movement. It confirmed the opportunist character of the political tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel from which the genuine Trotskyists broke in 1953 to form the International Committee of the Fourth International. At every stage, the Pabloites facilitated and condoned the political downsliding of the LSSP, paving the way for its entry in to the Bandaranaike government.

The third article deals with the events leading up to the LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government and the central political responsibility of the Pabloites. Part 1 of this series can be read [here](#) and Part 2 [here](#).

On June 11, 1964 the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) entered a coalition with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government, which was tottering on the brink of collapse in the face of an upsurge of militancy in the working class. The LSSP's betrayal was not a sudden about-face, but the product of more than a decade of political backsliding and adaptation to the SLFP's Sinhala communal politics, aided and abetted at every step by the Pabloite International Secretariat.

As early as 1960, the LSSP leadership narrowly defeated a push by leading figure N. M. Perera to open the door for a coalition with the SLFP. As the political crisis in Sri Lanka deepened, the response of the LSSP leadership was based on crass parliamentary calculations and trade union syndicalism—that is, on opportunism, not the revolutionary fight for socialist internationalism.

In January 1962, a determined strike by dock workers was followed by a strike of all bank clerks in June and July. In January 1963, Bandaranaike called in the army to break strike action by bus workers of the state-owned transport board. In June, workers at the Wellawatte Textile Mills took up a struggle for better pay. Among rural youth, there was widespread resentment and restiveness over chronic unemployment and poverty.

In ruling circles, Bandaranaike came under growing pressure to take decisive action against the working class. In January 1962, she had already faced a coup attempt by military and police officers with connections to pro-Western elites. The banning of strikes and the use of the army did not stem the mounting crisis, as broader sections of workers took action.

In response, the LSSP formed a United Left Front (ULF) with the Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) in August 1963, which was to provide the political stepping stone to join the Bandaranaike government less than a year later. From the outset, the CP and the MEP were pushing for a coalition with the SLFP. The MEP's involvement was particularly significant. Its leader was Philip

Gunawardene. After quitting the LSSP in 1950, he had swung rapidly to the right. He served as a minister in the 1956 SLFP-led government that implemented the “Sinhala only” language policy directed against Tamils.

The ULF was a popular front formation that subordinated the rising working class movement to parliamentary manoeuvres and the perspective of pressuring the Bandaranaike government for concessions. Its 16-point program, including the nationalisation of some tea and rubber estates and amendments to the 1948 constitution, remained entirely within the framework of capitalist rule. Moreover, by supporting the retention of Sinhala as the only state language throughout most of the island and the repatriation of Tamil-speaking plantation workers, the program lined up with the SLFP's communal policies.

The Pabloite seventh world congress in June 1963 praised the LSSP's plans for the ULF. The congress declared that the LSSP “correctly raised the question of a United Left Front, both to arrest the movement to the right and to help masses to move towards an alternative left.” It completely ignored a minority within the LSSP that characterised the ULF as a popular front.

The difference was not a matter of semantics but of class orientation. The ULF 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 programs, banners and slogans. Rather it replicated the Stalinist Popular Fronts of the 1930s formed on the basis of a common political program with opportunist and bourgeois parties that shackled the working class to the bourgeoisie, private property and the state, and blocked its independent revolutionary activity.

The congress also sealed the reunification of the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP) with the Pabloite International Secretariat. The SWP had issued the Open Letter in 1953 opposing the opportunism of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel and played the leading role in forming the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to defend orthodox Trotskyism.

However, following the split, the SWP began to retreat from its principled opposition to Pabloism. A key turning point was its response to the Cuban revolution in 1959 led by Fidel Castro. The SWP hailed the new regime, established by a petty bourgeois guerrilla movement, in glowing terms as “a workers state.”

The SWP's draft theses on the Cuban revolution written in December 1960 declared that, though there were no proletarian organs of power, like soviets, in Cuba, “it has moved in a socialist direction.” The theses continued: “Cuban revolutionaries do not have any time for spinning fine theories. They are practical people, swamped with tasks.”

These formulations signalled the SWP's abandonment of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated the organic incapacity of the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie to carry out democratic, let alone socialist, tasks in backward capitalist countries like Cuba. Trotsky insisted that only the working class, by taking power at the head of the rural poor, could carry out the democratic tasks and begin the

socialist reconstruction of society. To lead that struggle, a proletarian revolutionary party was needed.

The SWP reunified with the Pabloites at the 1963 congress without any discussion of the principled differences that led to the 1953 split. Justifying the adaptation to petty-bourgeois movements as in Cuba, the “unity congress” declared that “the weakness of the enemy in backward countries has opened the possibility of coming to power with a blunted instrument.” After the regroupment, the Pabloite international was renamed the United Secretariat (USec).

From 1961 to 1963, the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British section of the ICFI, led a political fight against the SWP’s retreat, warning of its consequences for the Trotskyist movement. The SLL rejected the contention that petty bourgeois leaderships would be forced by “the logic of the revolution itself” to lead the working class to power and insisted that the central task remained the resolution of the crisis of proletarian leadership through the building of Bolshevik-type parties.

The reunification of the SWP with the Pabloites, which the LSSP had actively encouraged, strengthened the hand of the LSSP leaders, who were adapting to the SLFP and its Sinhala populism.

The formation of the United Left Front led to the establishment of the Joint Committee of Trade Unions around a list of 21 demands in September 1963. For the first time, workers in the public, private and plantation sectors united on a common ground across ethnic lines. The Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) called a harbour workers’ strike, which ended after 69 days in January 1964. The union defied an ultimatum by Bandaranaike to return to work and won significant concessions. As class tensions continued to mount, Bandaranaike prorogued the parliament in February.

In the midst of the political crisis, the unions called a huge rally at Galle Face Green in central Colombo on March 21, 1964. While LSSP leaders like Colvin R. de Silva thundered about the next step that workers had to take, the LSSP’s top leader N. M. Perera was secretly at the prime minister’s official residence, Temple Trees, discussing how to assist the government to defeat the challenge from the working class.

Even as the betrayal was being prepared, the Pabloite USec heaped praise on the LSSP. In an April 1964 letter, it endorsed “the United Front of the Left,” saying it was “strengthened by mass struggle and directed to the establishment of its own political power on a genuinely socialist program.” The letter declared: “Ceylon can provide another Cuba or Algeria and prove to be even greater inspiration to revolutionary minded workers throughout the world.”

Bandaranaike, as a class conscious representative of bourgeoisie, knew very well why her government required the LSSP’s support. In a speech on May 10, 1964, she explained: “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 Gunawardene and Mr. N.M. Perera.”

The LSSP right wing led by Perera, with the support of the “centre” faction led by former BLPI leaders Colvin R. de Silva and Leslie Goonewardene, hurriedly called a party conference on June 6-7 to ratify a proposal to enter a coalition with the SLFP.

At the conference, Perera’s resolution justified the coalition by denying that the SLFP was a bourgeois party, falsely characterising it as “a party based on the radical petty-bourgeoisie and the lower middle class” that “had shed some of its more reactionary elements” and carried out nationalisations.

Perera’s formulations were a rejection of what Trotsky had written

about such political formations. While its social base might include layers of the urban petty bourgeoisie and the rural peasantry, the SLFP was dominated by sections of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie whose interests were reflected in its program. However, the resolution was fully in line with the USec’s adulation of Castro’s movement in Cuba.

The “centre” faction had no fundamental disagreement with entering the Bandaranaike government, but proposed that other ULF partners should be included as well.

Only the Revolutionary minority led by Edmund Samarakkody and Bala Tampoe rejected outright any coalition with the SLFP. “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,” it warned in its resolution.

The LSSP’s profound political degeneration was revealed in the vote on the three resolutions. The right wing received 501 votes, the “centre” 75 votes and the Revolutionary minority 159 votes. After the vote, the minority faction walked out of the conference and met at another venue to form the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Revolutionary).

The LSSP’s agreement with the SLFP amounted to a complete capitulation to its capitalist program and Sinhala communal politics. The LSSP agreed to support the continuation of the Sinhala-only language policy and the repatriation of Tamil plantation workers to India. In return, Perera was made finance minister and the LSSP received two other ministries.

The betrayal was a devastating exposure of the opportunist politics of the Pabloites and the decision of the US SWP to rejoin them. In a desperate attempt to cover up their role, the USec opposed the entry into the Bandaranaike government, but called for a return to the United Left Front—that is, to the popular front formation that opened the door for the betrayal. USec expelled Perera and the two other LSSP ministers and suspended the LSSP members who had voted for entry into the government. It prevaricated for months before taking any action against the “centre” leaders who remained inside the LSSP.

Significantly the LSSP(R), while opposing the entry into the Bandaranaike government, remained inside the USec that had facilitated it. Only the British SLL and the ICFI sheeted home the responsibility for the LSSP’s historic betrayal to Pabloite opportunism. SLL leader Gerry Healy travelled to Colombo on behalf of the ICFI to oppose the LSSP’s treachery but was refused entry into the LSSP conference where the vote was taken to join the government.

In a statement on July 5, the ICFI drew the 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.”

To be continued



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