

# The LSSP's Great Betrayal: Part 4

## The political consequences of the LSSP's betrayal

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*This is the final article in a series of four 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 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.*

*This article examines the aftermath of the LSSP's betrayal and draws the necessary political conclusions for the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. Part 1 of this series can be read [here](#), Part 2 [here](#) and Part 3 [here](#).*

The LSSP's betrayal had far-reaching political consequences. In Sri Lanka, the LSSP's complete abandonment of the program of socialist internationalism created political confusion and disorientation among workers and youth. It opened the door for the poisonous communal politics that ultimately led to the eruption of the island's protracted civil war in 1983, which claimed hundreds of thousands of lives over the next quarter century.

Throughout the region, the Stalinist parties were in considerable crisis, following the uprising by East German workers in 1953, the "secret speech" by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 exposing some of Stalin's crimes, and the brutal suppression of the Hungarian workers' revolt in the same year. The bitter disputes between the Soviet bureaucracy and the Chinese leadership under Mao Zedong in the early 1960s, leading to the Sino-Soviet split, wracked the Stalinist parties internationally.

In 1953, the LSSP had sided with Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel against the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which was critical of Pablo's and Mandel's false claim that Stalinism could project a revolutionary orientation under mass pressure. The LSSP, like the Pabloite international as a whole, was soon covering up the crimes of Stalinism. In 1957, LSSP delegations visited Moscow and Beijing without mentioning the repression against the Hungarian working class or the continued imprisonment of Trotskyists in China.

The LSSP's degeneration and entry into the Bandaranaike government in June 1964 gave the Stalinist parties a new lease of life, particularly in India where a damaging split within the Communist Party of India (CPI), led to the formation of the Beijing-aligned Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) in 1964. The lack of a Trotskyist opposition helped the Indian Stalinists survive the crisis and maintain their dominant position in the working class.

The Maoist variant of Stalinism, which falsely claimed the mantle of

revolutionary Marxist-Leninism, while denouncing "Soviet revisionism," involved a rejection of the working class and an orientation to peasant-based guerrillaism. Chinese Stalinism bore particular responsibility for the Indonesian Communist Party's (PKI) abject support for Indonesian President Sukarno that paved the way for the bloody CIA-backed coup in 1965-66 and the deaths of half a million PKI members, workers and peasants.

The LSSP betrayal was in no small measure responsible for allowing Maoism to flourish in Asia unchallenged, resulting in peasant guerrilla movements led by Maoist parties in India, the Philippines and Nepal.

At the same time, the LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government in 1964 produced a diametrically opposed response. The ICFI was alone in insisting that the LSSP's degeneration was not the product of Trotskyism, but of its opposite—Pabloite opportunism. As the British Socialist Labour League (SLL) leader Gerry Healy explained, the chief architects of the LSSP's betrayal resided, not in Colombo, but in Paris in the Pabloite United Secretariat (USec).

The LSSP's actions were a powerful vindication of the SLL's political struggle against the reunification of the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which had played the key role in the formation of the ICFI in 1953, with the Pabloites the previous year. The USec attempted to suppress any criticism of the LSSP betrayal within its ranks. Inside the SWP, the supporters of the ICFI were suspended from membership for demanding an internal party discussion. They formed the American Committee for the Fourth International, which became the Workers League in 1966—the forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party in the US.

The SLL's intervention, on behalf of the ICFI, also led to the revival of Trotskyism in Sri Lanka with the formation of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) in 1968. While the LSSP (R) broke from the LSSP after the 1964 conference that ratified the betrayal, the party continued to support the Pabloite USec and the opportunist politics that led to the LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government.

The ICFI's analysis found its way to a grouping of students and young workers who regarded themselves as Trotskyist and were increasingly hostile not only to the LSSP, but also to the LSSP (R). Having made contact with the SLL in 1966, the group systematically studied the documents of the ICFI's struggle against Pabloism and began publishing the *Virodhaya* newspaper.

Within the LSSP (R), Wilfred "Spike" Perera, who had been a member of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), opposed the political orientation of the party's leadership and collaborated with the *Virodhaya* group. During a visit by Ernest Mandel to Sri Lanka in 1967, Spike accused the USec of being "directly responsible for the degeneration and ultimate debacle of the LSSP." He was subsequently witch-hunted and left the LSSP (R) after putting a resolution calling for its adherence to the ICFI.

From the outset, the RCL had to swim against the tide. In the midst of the Vietnam War and a rising movement of the working class

internationally, the 1960s and 1970s were marked by an outpouring of various forms of middle class radicalism, including in Sri Lanka. With the endorsement of the Pabloites, such figures as Che Guevara, Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh became popular icons.

The overriding characteristic of all these political tendencies was their rejection of the independent mobilisation of the working class and their turn to other class forces—whether the peasantry in backward capitalist countries, or students and various movements based on identity politics in the major imperialist centres.

The RCL waged a consistent and determined struggle for Trotskyism in difficult circumstances in which the LSSP and LSSP (R) still commanded significant influence in the working class and new parties based on radical communal politics appeared to be more successful. Led by its youthful general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya, who was elected to the post in 1968 at the age of just 19, the RCL demarcated itself from all those who pretended to represent Marxism.

The LSSP's treachery opened the door for the formation of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or People's Liberation Front, in 1966. Its eclectic mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism won support among disaffected rural Sinhala youth in the island's south. Balasuriya wrote an extensive series of articles on the *Politics and Class Nature of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*, debunking its anti-Marxist theories, exposing its hostility to the working class and warning that its anti-Tamil rhetoric foreshadowed its possible degeneration into a fascist organisation.

Based on its theory of the "armed struggle," the JVP launched an adventurist "uprising" against the second SLFP coalition government with the LSSP and Stalinist Communist Party that came to power in 1970. The government brutally crushed the revolt in April 1971, killing an estimated 15,000 rural youth and imprisoning another 30,000. Notwithstanding its fundamental political differences with the JVP, the RCL took a principled stand in opposing the state repression. Its publications were banned and the party forced to operate underground. Two RCL members were arrested and killed in police custody.

After the crushing of the JVP uprising, the SLFP-led government, in which three LSSP ministers served in key posts, enacted discriminatory measures against the Tamil minority, epitomised in a new communal constitution that enshrined Sinhala as the state language and Buddhism as the state religion. Amid widespread revulsion toward the "left" government and its "Trotskyist" ministers, disaffected Tamil youth turned to armed separatist organisations, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which cited the LSSP's betrayal to denounce Trotskyism and Marxism.

The SLFP-led coalition was flung out of office in a landslide defeat in 1977 amid widespread hostility among working people to the social and economic disaster it presided over. The right-wing United National Party (UNP) government was one of the first in the world to adopt pro-market restructuring, provoking a general strike in 1980 over jobs and wages. With the assistance of the LSSP, CP, and LSSP (R), it inflicted a crushing defeat on the working class, by sacking 100,000 public sector employees. The JVP opposed the strike and blocked its unions from taking part.

The UNP's resort to anti-Tamil provocations, culminating in the 1983 pogroms in which hundreds were killed, plunged the island into a devastating and protracted civil war. The RCL was the only political party to oppose the war, demand the unconditional withdrawal of troops from the North and East and defend the democratic rights of Tamils, while opposing the separatist program of the LTTE and other Tamil parties.

Five decades after the LSSP's betrayal, it is instructive to draw up a political balance sheet. All those individuals and parties who were extolled as great "revolutionaries" in the 1960s and 1970s have produced an unmitigated disaster for the working class.

The Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy carried out its final act of treachery in

1991 by openly embracing capitalist restoration and dissolving the Soviet Union, leading to a terrible social retrogression in the former Soviet republics. The Maoist leadership in China made its peace with imperialism with the Nixon-Mao rapprochement in 1972, paving the way for the reestablishment of capitalist relations and the transformation of the entire country into a massive cheap labour platform for global corporations.

In opposition to the universal wave of pessimism in petty bourgeois radical circles, the ICFI alone insisted that the collapse of the Soviet Union did not represent the failure of socialism, but of Stalinism. The globalisation of production had profoundly undermined all parties, states and organisations that based themselves on the program of national economic regulation and reform. Moreover, the ICFI warned that far from ushering in a new period of peace and prosperity, the end of the Soviet Union foreshadowed a deepening of the crisis of world capitalism, growing geo-political tensions and war, and an intensifying assault against the social position of the working class.

The heirs of Castro and Ho Chi Minh in Cuba and Vietnam have followed the same path as the Maoists in China—opening their economies to foreign investors. The Indian CPM has implemented the same anti-working class agenda in the Indian states of West Bengal and Kerala. One after another, the advocates of the "armed struggle" have reached an accommodation with imperialism and their own bourgeoisie, trading their military fatigues for business suits and parliamentary seats. Maoists in the Philippines are thoroughly integrated into the political establishment, while their counterparts in Nepal assumed the reins of government in 2008.

Within Sri Lanka, the political landscape has transformed. The LSSP is a squeezed lemon that no longer serves any useful function for the bourgeoisie. It exists only as a political appendage of the SLFP, sanctioning all the Rajapakse government's criminal policies. The LSSP (R) suffered a series of splits in the 1970s and, following its refusal to support the 1980 general strike, lost any standing in the working class and vanished without a trace.

The LSSP's politics of coalitionism and class collaboration are continued today by the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), and its breakaway, the United Socialist Party (USP), whose leaders remained inside the LSSP for over a decade after the 1964 betrayal. Having promoted the SLFP for years as the "lesser evil" compared to the right-wing UNP, the NSSP and USP are currently in a de facto alliance with the UNP, proclaiming it to be the "democratic alternative" to the "dictatorial" SLFP government.

Confirming the analysis that Keerthi Balasuriya had made, the JVP played a particularly reactionary role in the late 1980s. It whipped up a fascist campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord that paved the way for Indian "peace-keepers" to disarm the LTTE. JVP gunmen killed hundreds of political opponents and workers who refused to support its "patriotic" strikes and protests. These actions did not prevent the JVP from being integrated into the political establishment after the SLFP came to power in 1994 and joining an SLFP-led government in 2004.

The LTTE, acting on behalf of the Tamil bourgeoisie, repeatedly sought the backing of imperialism to turn the North and East of the island into a separate Tamil capitalist state and a new source of cheap labour. But its pleas fell on deaf ears, as India, with US backing, feared it would lead to separatist agitation at home. The LTTE's defeat in 2009 at the hands of the Sri Lankan military was not primarily a military one, but stemmed from the bankruptcy of its bourgeois political agenda. Incapable of making any appeal to Tamil workers, let alone the working class in the rest of the island, in India and internationally, the LTTE was reduced to making impotent appeals to the US and other powers that were backing Colombo's war.

The ICFI and the RCL, now the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka,

alone have fought to unify the working class on the basis of socialist internationalism, rejecting all forms of nationalism and communalism. The SEP has been guided by Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated the inability of any section of the bourgeoisie in backward capitalist countries to wage a consistent struggle against imperialism or carry out basic democratic and social tasks. The SEP's perspective is embodied in its fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

That political struggle takes on a particular political significance today. The breakdown of world capitalism that began with the 2008 global financial crisis has greatly exacerbated geo-political tensions and eruption of militarism, while governments in every country are imposing the agenda of "austerity" on working people. US imperialism, which has already destabilised the region with its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, is engaged in a new and more dangerous war in the Middle East, a confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, and an aggressive "pivot to Asia" aimed at politically weakening and militarily encircling China. A century after the outbreak of World War I and 75 years since the onset of the World War II, the threat of a third global conflagration looms.

Sri Lanka is caught up in this maelstrom of geo-political rivalries. Like their counterparts internationally, various fake left parties that previously postured as "anti-imperialist" are all lining up with one or other faction of the capitalist class as they manoeuvre for the support of the imperialist powers. Most striking is the alignment of the NSSP and the USP with the UNP, which has long been notorious for its ties to US imperialism.

The ICFI is the only organisation on the face of the planet that is fighting to build a unified anti-war movement of the international working class to end the slide to world war by abolishing capitalism—the root cause of war. The protracted and difficult political struggle by the RCL/SEP against the consequences of the LSSP's betrayal contains vital lessons for the working class in Sri Lanka, South Asia and around the world. This record has been detailed in *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)*. We urge workers and youth seeking a revolutionary road out of the catastrophe being prepared by capitalism to study these political lessons and apply to join and build the ICFI in Asia and internationally.

*Concluded*



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