

Sri Lankan Maoist party advocates “progressive Tamil nationalism”

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The New Democratic Marxist-Leninist Party (NDMLP), a Maoist group in Sri Lanka, has attempted to breathe new life into the fetid politics of Tamil communalism by declaring its support for “progressive Tamil nationalism” as against “reactionary Tamil nationalism.” The NDMLP is based in northern Sri Lanka, where the majority of the population are Tamils, and also in the central hill districts where a large number of Tamil-speaking tea plantation workers live.

NDMLP general secretary S.K. Senthivel was asked in an interview in the December 29 issue of Tamil language newspaper *Uthayan* about the newly-formed Tamil People’s Forum (TPF), organised by a section of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) with the Tamil National People Front (TNPF) and several civil organisations.

Senthivel declared: “People need a change. They must come to the alternative policy from the basic policy. There exists reactionary Tamil nationalism. People must accept progressive Tamil nationalism.” The TNA and TNPF, he claimed, were following “reactionary Tamil nationalist policies” while the NDMLP was pursuing “progressive nationalism.”

The distinction is a false one. There is nothing progressive about Tamil nationalism, or indeed about nationalism in any form. In the 1980s, all of the bourgeois nationalist movements, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and in Sri Lanka, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), moved sharply to the right, dropping any anti-imperialist posturing and seeking an accommodation with the major powers. This political transformation reflected the impact of the globalisation of production, which completely undermined the program of national economic regulation on which all of these organisations had been based.

The LTTE’s military defeat in 2009 was a product of the bankruptcy of its nationalist perspective of carving out a Tamil capitalist state in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Even as its ruthless anti-democratic methods alienated Tamil workers, peasants and youth, the LTTE’s denunciations of the entire Sinhala population for the crimes of the Colombo government ensured it was incapable of making any appeal to the working class in Sri Lanka or more broadly in South Asia and internationally. With the Sri Lankan army closing in on its last strongholds, the LTTE issued futile appeals to the very major powers that were backing Colombo.

NDMLP’s attempt to distance itself from the TNA and its

“reactionary Tamil nationalism” is another indication of the crisis in the ranks of these organisations, all of which supported the LTTE. Their continued promotion of Tamil separatism, in one form or another, serves to divide the working class and block a unified struggle for democratic rights as part of the fight for socialism.

The TNA, which now controls the Northern Provincial Council, is increasingly discredited among Tamil workers, rural poor and youth. While the majority of the population lacks jobs and basic amenities, the TNA is wheeling and dealing with the Colombo government, and intriguing with the US, India and other powers, for the “devolution” of greater powers to the North and East for the benefit of the venal Tamil bourgeoisie.

The NDMLP is seeking to steer the opposition to the TNA into the blind alley of “progressive Tamil nationalism.” In its 2015 congress document, the Maoist party accuses “the reactionary Tamil nationalist leadership” of an “elitist hegemonic ideology,” high-caste domination, loyalty to imperialism and being opposed to uniting with other nationalities.

By contrast, the NDMLP declares that “progressive Tamil nationalism” should give “primacy to all working people upholding democracy, emphasis on economic self-reliance and developing productive industry,” refuse “to bow to the hegemonic forces of India, US and Europe,” and unify with other communities.

In line with the Stalinist/Maoist two-stage theory, the NDMLP’s program is not for socialism, but for a “new democratic revolution” which means the subordination of the working class to the so-called “progressive” bourgeoisie. In reality, the Maoists are seeking the establishment of a bourgeois state, in which they would play the role of policing the exploitation of the working class on behalf of foreign investors and international finance capital.

The communal character of the NDMLP’s perspective is epitomised by its proposal for a further fracturing of the working class along ethnic and religious lines. Its congress document calls for “autonomy for traditional homelands for the Tamils and Muslims and based on the right to self-determination within a united Sri Lanka. It should recognise the Hill Country Tamils as a nationality and assure them of autonomy.”

The NDMLP’s communalism is underscored by its designation of Tamil plantation workers in the island’s central hill districts as “Hill Country Tamils”—obliterating the class divisions. The

plantation trade unions, like the Colombo ruling elite, also emphasise the separate character of “Hill Country Tamils” to keep these workers divided from other workers and continue their ruthless exploitation.

The proposal for autonomous regions has nothing to do with defending the democratic rights of workers or the oppressed masses but is a prescription for deepening communal tensions. It is an appeal to the bourgeois and petty bourgeois layers that dominate the various Tamil and Muslim communities and yearn for autonomy as a means of boosting their share in the exploitation of the working class.

Under the guise of allying with a so-called progressive wing of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, the NDMLP has a long and sordid history of manoeuvring with the major parties of the Colombo political establishment—the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

The NDMLP was founded in 1978 by a breakaway faction of Maoist Ceylon Communist Party (CCP-Beijing wing), formed in 1964 in a split from the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL).

From its inception, the NDMLP gravitated towards the SLFP. In 1988, it supported the SLFP’s chauvinist anti-Indian campaign against the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord which was signed the previous year by the New Delhi and Colombo governments to send Indian army “peacekeepers” into the North and East to disarm the LTTE. The SLFP was in turn aligned with the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) whose death squads killed those who opposed its fascist campaign.

In 1994, along with the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the NDMLP openly campaigned for the SLFP presidential candidate Chandrika Kumaratunga in the name of defeating the right-wing UNP government. After coming to power promising peace and improved living standards, Kumaratunga intensified the war and extended her predecessor’s pro-market policies and attacks on working people.

Despite its anti-imperialist posturing, the NDMLP has invariably lined up behind the machinations of the major powers. In 2002, it supported the bogus peace process between the UNP government and the LTTE that was backed by the US, the EU and Japan as a means of ending the destabilising conflict and enlisting the LTTE as a junior partner in the Colombo government’s austerity program.

During the civil war, the NDMLP politically supported the LTTE right up until its military defeat in May 2009. Its occasional criticisms of LTTE’s “repressive methods,” which also threatened the lives of party leaders and members, only served as a safety valve for the mounting opposition among Tamils towards the LTTE.

After the LTTE’s collapse, the NDMLP increasingly lined up with the UNP, this time in the name of defeating the right-wing SLFP-led government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

In the presidential election in January 2015, NDMLP gave tacit support for Maithripala Sirisena, in what was a US-backed regime-change operation. While declaring that there was no difference between Rajapakse and Sirisena, Senthivel nevertheless concentrated his fire on Rajapakse’s “fascistic rule” and warned that “abstaining or boycotting this election would not be political

wise in today’s situation.”

By indirectly backing Sirisena, the NDMLP gave its stamp of approval for a US-backed regime-change operation to oust Rajapakse, not because of his anti-democratic methods, but because he was too closely aligned with China. In the aftermath of last year’s presidential and parliamentary elections, it sought to cover up their significance by declaring that the results were “merely changes of personalities.” Its support for the election of Sirisena has only helped ensure that Sri Lanka is being integrated into the US preparations throughout the region for war against China.

The NDMLP is now seeking to form another opportunist alliance, calling in a recent statement for “a broad united front of left, progressive and democratic forces” to “address the immediate issues facing the country and the people.” This is nothing but an appeal for a Syriza-style formation comprising various pseudo-left organisations such as the NSSP, United Socialist Party and Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), to corral the mounting opposition of workers and rural poor to the UNP-led government and divert it into the dead-end of parliamentary manoeuvring.

There is no solution to the issues facing the working class—war, austerity and continuing attacks on democratic rights—other than through the building of a unified movement in Sri Lanka, South Asia and globally based on socialist internationalism. The crucial issue facing workers and youth in Sri Lanka—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—is a fundamental break from all forms of communal politics and the turn to a perspective based on class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its forerunner Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) has a record of unrelenting struggle against anti-Tamil discrimination and against the war waged by successive Colombo governments. We have consistently fought to unify workers to put an end to the capitalist system which is the root cause of national oppression and discrimination. Our program calls for the fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and around the world.

We urge workers and youth to study our perspective and join the SEP as the revolutionary leadership needed for the struggles ahead.



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