

May Day 2017

# The fight for international socialism in South Asia

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2 May 2017

*This speech was delivered by Wije Dias, General Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, to the 2017 International May Day Online Rally held on April 30.*

Political, social, and inter-state relations in South Asia are being dramatically reshaped by two interconnected processes.

First, the region is caught up in the whirlpool of geo-political tensions produced by the drive towards another imperialist war.

US imperialism is principally responsible for this. In 2001, in the name of the phony “war on terror,” it invaded Afghanistan, so as to establish a military-strategic beachhead adjacent to Central Asia’s vast oil reserves, and states that it views as key strategic adversaries—Russia, China, and Iran. Moreover, Washington, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, has spared no effort in harnessing India, through a raft of strategic favours, to its strategic offensive, thereby whetting the Indian bourgeoisie’s own reactionary great power ambitions.

Second, the class struggle is sharpening. The claim that the masses of South Asia would be lifted from poverty and squalor through so-called economic liberalization has proven completely hollow. While India is now home to 101 billionaires, the fourth largest number of any country in the world, three-quarters of the population eke out a precarious existence on less than \$2 per day. Ever deepening social inequality and economic insecurity are fueling growing working class resistance. Last September, 150 million Indian workers participated in a one-day protest strike. Sri Lanka’s government, shaken by a wave of strikes and social protests, is reportedly considering reappointing the war criminal Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka as army chief and arming him with special powers to, in the words of officials, “discipline the country.”

The election of the billionaire Donald Trump as US president is not an aberration, but a sign of an arch reactionary tendency within the ruling elite. The ruthlessness

with which Trump prepares to establish US hegemony over the globe has heightened geo-political tensions everywhere, including the Indian Ocean region. The US armada sent to the East China Sea is targeting not just North Korea, but the aggressive subjugation of China itself.

The groundwork for this strategic turn by US imperialism was laid during the Democratic presidency of Barack Obama, with his “Pivot to Asia” policy. The US offensive against China has raised the strategic importance of South Asia as a whole and Sri Lanka and India—which sit astride the Indian Ocean corridor between East Asia, Europe and the Middle East—in particular.

The Obama White House’s push to enhance Washington’s “global strategic alliance” with India—a policy the Trump administration has vowed to continue—has been welcomed with open arms by the Indian bourgeoisie, which in 2014 turned to Narendra Modi and his Hindu chauvinist BJP to intensify anti-working-class pro-market reforms and more aggressively assert its great power ambitions on the world stage.

India has become the main US policeman in the region. This was revealed when Obama, participating as guest of honor at India’s Republic Day celebrations in August 2015, publicly praised Modi for playing a critical role in Washington’s regime-change operation in Sri Lanka, at the beginning of that year. This operation replaced President Mahinda Rajapakse, who was developing closer relations with Beijing, with the government of Maithripala Sirisena, supported by the traditionally pro-US United National Party.

During the last two years, Indo-US relations have undergone a qualitative transformation, with India being transformed into a veritable “frontline state” in the US war drive against China. Last August, India opened its air bases and ports for use by US warplanes and battleships and in February it was revealed that the ships of the US Seventh Fleet, the armada at the center of US war plans against China, are to be serviced at an Indian shipyard. With

Washington's designation of India as a major defense partner, India has received access to US weapons systems, on par with US imperialism's most trusted allies. India has also strengthened bilateral and trilateral strategic ties with Washington's chief Asian allies, Japan and Australia. The joint military exercises that have accompanied these ties are being increasingly extended to incorporate Sri Lanka as well, as in the case of the recent Malabar naval exercises.

China and India's historic arch-rival, Pakistan, have responded to US imperialism's "strategic favours" to New Delhi by strengthening their own longstanding strategic ties.

Pakistan's reactionary bourgeois elite has for decades served as a satrap for US imperialism. Its fondest wish would be for that to continue, but the US embrace of India has, as Islamabad has repeatedly warned, overturned the balance of power in South Asia and encouraged Indian belligerence.

The extreme dangers that arise from these developments were starkly exposed at the end of last year, when India and Pakistan, both nuclear-armed countries, reached the edge of the precipice of war. India, with the implicit support of the US, launched "surgical strikes" inside Pakistan, then publicly boasted that the era of India's "strategic restraint" with Pakistan was over. As border clashes mounted, South Asia teetered for weeks on the brink of war.

US strategists view India and Sri Lanka as pivotal to US domination over the entire Indian Ocean and Asian landmass. One cannot forget that the Sri Lankan hill city of Kandy was the headquarters of the British imperialist war machine throughout the entire Indo-Pacific region during the Second World War. Changing what needs to be changed, US imperialism is seeking to revive British colonial strategy, which used the British Indian Army to not only subjugate the masses of colonial India, but to conquer Burma, suppress the Boxer Rebellion and wage war around the globe during two world wars.

Behind the bombast, Trump's "America First" policy is a policy of social counter-revolution aimed at reducing the American working class to levels of poverty akin to those in the historically oppressed countries. The pliant bourgeois governments in South Asia, as elsewhere around the world, are likewise driving down the social conditions of the workers still further. Along with this social devastation, carried out under cover of national and racist chauvinism, all the hard-won democratic rights of the working class have come under ruthless attack.

In Sri Lanka, preparations for turning the country into a military-police state are well advanced. While the military that was used to prosecute the brutal thirty-year civil war against the Tamil minority is being expanded, with new recruits and barbaric equipment, constitutional and legal

changes are underway for the establishment of autocratic rule that will surpass that of any previous regime.

In India, workers at Maruti Suzuki who challenged sweatshop conditions have been ruthlessly persecuted, with their leaders jailed for life on frame-up charges. In Kashmir, protests against Indian rule are being met with brutal repression and war-mongering against Pakistan.

In every country in the region repressive laws are being tightened and the state apparatuses strengthened under conditions of a new wave of working class struggles and the spread of mass rural unrest.

The chief obstacle to the revolutionary mobilization of the working class in South Asia, as around the world, are the ostensibly left parties, the pro-capitalist unions, and their pseudo-left allies. The Stalinist parties in India have responded to the bourgeoisie's turn to Modi and the intensification of class struggle by stepping up their efforts to bind the working class to the Indian political establishment and state. In Sri Lanka, the head of the NSSP, who hailed Sirisena's coming to power—the result of a US-orchestrated regime change operation—as a "democratic revolution," has now publicly supported the government's imposition of IMF-dictated austerity.

None of the burning democratic and social problems that the workers face, that the people, toilers, and youth of South Asia confront—from the threat of imperialist war and mass joblessness, to continuing caste oppression and a nation-state system founded on communalism—can be answered outside the building of new mass working class parties, based on the Trotskyist theory of Permanent Revolution, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The workers of South Asia must establish their political independence in opposition to all those Stalinist and pseudo-left forces who seek to tie them to the non-existent "progressive" bourgeoisie, rally the oppressed toilers behind them in the struggle against capitalism, and join forces with workers of the US, China and the world in the struggle against imperialist war and the malignant capitalist order.

We call upon all our listeners and readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* to join this struggle.



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