

Seventy years after Sri Lankan independence: The record of capitalist decay and the necessity for socialism

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The Sri Lankan government has announced a pompous ceremony on February 4 to mark the 70th anniversary of formal independence from British colonial rule in 1948. Reeling under the impact of the world economic crisis, rising geo-political rivalry and explosive social tensions at home, the government will exploit the ceremony to crank up reactionary nationalist sentiment.

Already, the government has demonstrated the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie's subservience to imperialism by inviting Prince Edward to attend as the representative of Britain's Queen Elizabeth.

President Maithripala Sirisena is scheduled to address the nation from Colombo's Galle Face Green. As he has nothing to offer working people, undoubtedly he will declare his determination to rid the country of corruption. This is now the main ploy of every faction of the ruling elite to deflect attention from the real root of all the country's "ills"—capitalism.

Sirisena came to power in January 2015 to derail seething mass opposition against former President Mahinda Rajapakse's anti-democratic rule and attacks on living conditions. The "national unity government" formed by Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to take on the working class is now tearing itself apart as both blame each other for the country's crisis.

There is no popular enthusiasm among working people for these independence celebrations. Strikes, student marches and peasant protests have been increasing for months. The election chief this week urged trade unions not to call industrial action until February 15 under the guise of not disturbing local government elections scheduled for February 10. The real fear in the ruling elite is the prospect of mass struggles as part of the radicalisation of the working class internationally.

The country is under the supervision of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is pressing for deep austerity measures, including halving the 2015 budget deficit. The top 20 percent of the population receives 51 percent of national income while the bottom 20 percent gets just 5 percent.

More than a quarter century of communal war against the island's Tamil minority was brought to a bloody end in 2009 by the Rajapakse regime with the support of all the major foreign powers. The war left nearly 200,000 dead. Tens of thousands of people still live in rudimentary huts without essential facilities in the island's north and east, which remains under military

occupation.

These politically explosive conditions are replicated throughout South Asia, where Britain only granted formal independence, in collusion with the national bourgeoisies, to abort the mass struggles that erupted against colonial rule in the late 1940s.

India has become one of the most unequal countries in the world, with the top 1 percent taking 23 percent of all income while the poorest 50 percent, or 600 million people, receive only 15 percent. The Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janatha Party, which took power in 2014 by capitalising on popular anger and disgust with Indian National Congress rule, is continuing to attack the living and social conditions of the masses in a bid to attract foreign investment.

A military-backed regime rules in Pakistan. In Bangladesh, Prime Minister Sheik Hasina's government is adopting ever-more authoritarian measures. None of the countries in the region has any other way of propping up capitalist rule against the rising tide of opposition.

Amid sharpening geo-political antagonisms, the danger of a catastrophic world war between nuclear-armed powers is growing. All the countries of South Asia are being drawn into the maelstrom as the US seeks to use its military might to maintain its global dominance, particularly against China. India has become a "frontline state" in Washington's war drive against Beijing, while Pakistan is increasingly under US pressure to distance itself from China.

In Sri Lanka, the US orchestrated the regime-change operation that installed Sirisena because it regarded Rajapakse as too close to China. Behind the backs of working people, the "national unity" government is integrating the country into the US military plans against China.

Throughout the Indian subcontinent, and indeed in all so-called post-colonial countries around the world, the capitalist classes and their political servants are demonstrating that there is no real independence from imperialism. Moreover, they have failed utterly to fulfill their promises to provide genuine democratic rights and a decent standard of living for all.

Seventy years ago, the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) and Fourth International founded in 1938 by Leon Trotsky were alone in exposing the "fake independence" being granted. BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva explained that the "independence" was merely a transition from "methods of direct rule to methods of

indirect rule.”

Facing a rising revolutionary upsurge of workers and poor in India, British imperialism conspired with the leaders of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League to partition the sub-continent into a Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan in 1947. The Stalinist Communist Party of India backed the carve-up, which led directly to bloody communal violence in which millions were killed.

The BLPI opposed the partition. De Silva explained: “Partition has proved in the one respect only a means for re-forging chains for the imperialist enslavement of the masses... In the other respect, it has proved but a means of beguiling two states to thoughts of mutual war as the only means of canalising internal communal feelings away from civil convulsions.”

Though the BLPI later adapted to the post-war arrangements, retreated politically and entered the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), its far-sighted prognosis has proven to be correct. India and Pakistan have fought three full-scale wars since independence and their ruling elites have used communalism as their main political weapon to divide working people and suppress the class struggle.

In Sri Lanka, the first act of the United National Party (UNP) government following formal independence was to strip more than a million Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin of all citizenship rights. The Colombo political establishment has repeatedly resorted to whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class along ethnic lines to prop up its rule.

The political degeneration of the LSSP culminated in its open rejection of the fundamental principles of socialist internationalism by entering the capitalist government of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. This betrayal was aided and abetted at every step by Pabloism, an opportunist faction of the Fourth International led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that broke from Trotskyism in 1953.

In entering the Bandaranaike government, the LSSP scuttled a mass movement of the working class and embraced the Sinhala supremacist ideology of the ruling elite. In 1972, the SLFP-LSSP coalition government, along with the Stalinist Communist Party, imposed a new constitution that made Buddhism the state religion and Sinhala the only official language.

The confusion created by the LSSP’s betrayal was exploited by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to gain a following among Sinhala rural youth based on an eclectic mixture of Castroism, Maoism and Sinhala populism. Among Tamil youth, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) won a hearing for its calls for Tamil separatism and the armed struggle.

The LSSP’s betrayal paved way for the discredited UNP to return to power in 1977 and impose its pro-market program on the working class. When public sector workers resisted these attacks, President J.R. Jayawardene sacked 100,000 employees and resorted to one communal provocation after another to divide the working class. In 1983, he launched the all-out war that devastated the island.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) was formed in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth

International (ICFI) to fight the betrayal of the LSSP on the basis of socialist internationalism. It alone has opposed all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, and sought to unite workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—against war and attacks on basic social and democratic rights.

The struggle of the RCL and SEP has been rooted in Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated the organic incapacity of the so-called national bourgeoisie in backward countries like Sri Lanka to meet any of the social and democratic aspirations of the masses. This program and perspective was powerfully confirmed by the socialist revolution in Russia in 1917, led by Lenin and Trotsky, that created the first and, to date, only workers’ state.

Every faction of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has demonstrated its regressive, anti-working class character. The JVP has long ago traded its military fatigues for parliamentary seats and is completely integrated into the Colombo establishment. The LTTE, which always represented the interests of Tamil bourgeoisie, sought to carve out a separate capitalist state with the backing of imperialism. The LTTE’s defeat in 2009, after the major powers turned decisively against it, proved once again the bankruptcy of nationalism.

The various pseudo-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party, United Socialist Party and Front Line Socialist Party, an offshoot of the JVP—are nothing but appendages and apologists for the major bourgeois parties. All of them lined up behind the US-backed operation in 2015 to install Sirisena.

The SEP is the only party that advances the program of international socialism in Sri Lanka. We fight for the political independence of the working class from every faction of the bourgeoisie and for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies to meet the pressing needs of working people, not fatten the profits of the wealthy few.

The SEP calls for a Sri Lankan and Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a federation of South Asian socialist republics. Only through the fight for socialist internationalism and the unity of the working class can democratic rights be defended and the threat of war stopped. The essential political weapon in this international fight is the *World Socialist Web Site* (wsws.org), the organ of the ICFI.

Through its Independence Day celebrations, the Sri Lankan ruling class is desperately attempting to whitewash its deplorable history of seventy years of anti-democratic rule and social decay. We urge workers, peasants, youth, students and intellectuals to reject this reactionary charade, study the program and perspective of the SEP and ICFI, and join the revolutionary struggle to abolish capitalism and create a socialist future for humanity.



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