

Remembrance Day in Sri Lanka exposes dead end of Tamil nationalism

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On May 18, five thousand people attended the ninth anniversary memorial of the Sri Lankan army massacre at Mullivaikal. They mourned the ruthless massacre of over 40,000 Tamils—including civilians, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters, and the entire LTTE leadership—that brought an end to the 26-year Sri Lankan civil war.

Overshadowing the event, nearly a decade after the end of the war, were the continuing hardships endured by the population of northern Sri Lanka. It still under military occupation, political prisoners have still not been released, and capitalists in Sri Lanka and internationally see it as a haven to find cheap labor, policed by the army and IMF austerity measures. As relatives of the victims and parents of children kidnapped by the state grieved, the army sent intelligence officials to block the distribution of food and drink and harass the mourners.

The event exposes the political bankruptcy of Tamil nationalism. While the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) unflaggingly opposes the regime in Colombo, fighting to unite the working class across Sri Lanka and the Indian subcontinent in struggle, the Tamil nationalist groups now serve as props of Washington and the Colombo ruling elite.

There is broad disaffection and explosive anger in northern Sri Lanka with the bourgeois Tamil National Alliance (TNA), the TNA-led Northern Provincial Council (NPC), and its collaboration with the Sri Lankan government and US imperialism. TNA leaders Mavai Senathirajah and Sritharan and other NPC parliament members were thrown out of the main event.

The Jaffna University Students Union opposed the TNA-led Northern Provincial Council (NPC) organising the event alone. However, as they joined the event, they declared they were “confident” in Northern Province Chief Minister C. Wigneswaran “in regard to genocide and the political aspirations of the Tamil people.”

Wigneswaran was chosen because he was the only speaker the mourners would accept, due to his occasional criticisms of the TNA.

However, Wigneswaran’s speech faithfully echoed the TNA, which collaborates with IMF austerity and US imperialism’s “pivot to Asia” aimed at isolating China, cynically presenting this as a way to get help from the “international community.”

Wigneswaran was silent on the war danger and on the TNA’s support for IMF austerity against workers across Sri Lanka—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike. He criticized Colombo’s unfulfilled promises to war victims and its disregard for UN resolutions, and presented five proposals, of which three were appeals to the “international community” to intervene and mediate with Colombo.

Explaining his policy, he said: “Any person who is familiar with the history of this island during the last 70 years is aware that without pressure from the international community or internal political pressure, no government is prepared to tread the path of progress towards a political solution for the national question. I make bold to call upon the international community on this occasion to resolve to give political pressure upon our Sri Lankan government to coax them to fulfil their obligations.”

Wigneswaran’s “bold” appeal to the “international community” is a dead end, part and parcel of the politics of Tamil nationalism ever since formal independence from Britain 70 years ago. At that time, it was the line of the pro-British Tamil bourgeoisie in their parliamentary maneuvers with the Sinhala bourgeois parties.

There are definite echoes of this policy in the TNA’s role today. After a US-backed regime-change operation installed President Mathripala Sirisena in 2015 on a program of aligning Sri Lanka with the “pivot to Asia” against China, the TNA supported the Sirisena regime from the opposition benches. It abandoned any struggle

for the release of Tamil political prisoners and mounted no opposition to Sirisena's IMF austerity measures despite mounting protests and popular opposition. It has proved bitterly hostile to democratic rights and to the working class.

The historic alternative to the bankruptcy of Tamil nationalism is the proletarian internationalism of the SEP. The perspective of armed struggle by Tamil bourgeois nationalists arose in the 1970s, due to the Pabloite betrayal of Trotskyism by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). But while the SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), opposed the LSSP's betrayal from the left, based on a defense of Trotskyism and a struggle for the unity of the working class, the Tamil nationalists attacked the LSSP from the right.

After formal independence, the LSSP had won broad support in the working and toiling masses, including Tamils, despite the vehement anti-communist attacks of the Tamil nationalists. But in 1964, having broken with Trotskyism and the perspective of the October Revolution, it entered into the bourgeois government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike and went on to back a Sinhala-chauvinist constitution. This was a capitulation to the bourgeoisie and its strategy of using racist attacks and appeals to turn Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers against each other.

It was a horrific blow to the working class—paving the way for Stalinists, Maoists and bourgeois nationalists to dominate in the working class across the region, including among Tamils, and ultimately leading to the eruption of a bloody civil war in Sri Lanka.

From the beginning, the LTTE's military strategy centered on getting the "international community" to force Colombo to the negotiating table. For a time, before the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union and the opening of India to finance capital in 1991, layers within the Tamil nationalist movement could present this as a "socialist" alliance with progressive states.

A quarter century after the dissolution of the USSR and after a nearly a decade of an oppressive peace, however, the pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist orientation of Tamil nationalism can no longer be hidden. Each visit from the US ambassador or US naval officials to the TNA or Wigneswaran underscores the close link between US military strategy in Asia and the Tamil nationalists' attempts to exploit the strategic position of Sri Lanka along the Indian Ocean's main shipping lanes.

The driving force behind Tamil nationalism is the class

interest of the tiny layer of Tamil capitalists. Wigneswaran made this clear in a statement he issued the day after his speech. He complained: "J.R.'s open economy created massive economic developments and opportunities, many Tamil businessmen intended to return to the country to start business, but what happened?"

J.R. Jayewardene, having won the 1977 elections, introduced economic reforms to promote an "open economy," creating Free Trade Zones that made substantial concessions to international capital and permitted unlimited exploitation of the working class. Faced with large-scale opposition among workers, including a mass strike of the public sector in 1980, the Jayewardene government and UNP goons organised the pogrom against the Tamils in July 1983. This led to the outbreak of the Sri Lankan civil war.

Looking back at Jayewardene's record, however, Wigneswaran's main complaint is not his policy of racist attacks on the Tamils, but that the Tamil businessmen did not get their share in the profits made from Jayewardene's attack on Sri Lankan workers.

The growing popular opposition to the TNA and to the Colombo regime vindicates the struggle of the RCL and its successor, the SEP, for Trotskyism. The RCL-SEP has an unblemished record of fighting for the social and democratic rights of the entire population, including the Tamil minority. Amid the political disintegration of the TNA, the SEP reasserts Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: the democratic rights of the masses and agrarian reforms can only be accomplished under the leadership of the working class, fighting for power in an international socialist revolution.

The way out of the dead end of Tamil nationalism for the workers and youth is the struggle to build the SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).



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