

The 50th anniversary of the founding of the SEP (Sri Lanka)

The lessons of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's Great Betrayal

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This is the first in a series of articles published by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka to mark the 50th anniversary of its foundation in June 1968. Established as the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), it was renamed the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in 1996. A statement has already been published to mark the RCL's founding congress on June 16–17, 1968.

These articles will elaborate the RCL's principled foundations and draw the essential political lessons from the struggle for these principles over the past 50 years. The RCL was founded on the program and perspective of socialist internationalism that the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which claimed to be a Trotskyist party, had betrayed by entering the bourgeois government of Madam Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964.

Central to the work of the SEP has been the fight for Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which established that in countries of a belated capitalist development only the working class is capable of leading the struggle for the basic democratic and social rights of the workers and rural toilers as part of the fight for socialism internationally. These lessons are critical for the emerging struggles of the working class, not only in Sri Lanka, but throughout Asia and the world.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) was founded in 1968 in the political struggle against the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which, in July 1964, joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike. In doing so, the LSSP sabotaged the mass movement of the working class that was threatening bourgeois rule on the island. Its betrayal sowed political confusion among workers in Sri Lanka, throughout the region and internationally.

Amid this disorientation, a group of mainly young people, radicalised by the Vietnam War and predatory imperialist crimes elsewhere, sought to understand why the LSSP had betrayed. But it was only when they came into contact with representatives of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), that they were able to discover the answer.

The "Great Betrayal" was not simply a matter of the LSSP leaders' treachery, or mistaken policies. Rather, it lay in the opportunist politics of the Pabloite United Secretariat, with which the LSSP was affiliated. A struggle for Trotskyism in Sri Lanka necessitated the establishment of a section of the ICFI as part of the fight against Pabloism and all forms of opportunism. That was the only road to the working class.

Fifty years later, the RCL, now the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), stands alone in the fight for the international socialist perspective of Trotskyism. The LSSP has functioned for decades as the chief political

prop of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and, as such, is responsible for all its crimes, including the atrocities committed during the protracted 30-year war against the island's Tamil minority. Today it lacks any significant base of support and is nothing more than an electoral appendage of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), a bourgeois party.

All the various factions of the LSSP (R) that split from the LSSP in 1964, but not from the Pabloite United Secretariat, have collapsed. The two pseudo-left descendants of the LSSP—the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party—shamelessly function as satellites of the Colombo political establishment and have assisted in establishing the current right-wing "national unity" government.

The evolution of these tendencies was foreshadowed in the LSSP's betrayal. In a remarkably far-sighted conclusion, the ICFI explained in 1964: "The entry of the LSSP members into the Bandaranaike coalition marks the end of a whole epoch of the evolution of the Fourth International. It is in the direct service to imperialism, in the preparation of a defeat for the working class, that [Pabloite] revisionism in the world Trotskyist movement has found its expression."

The International Committee of the Fourth International was established in 1953 in the struggle against an opportunist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, after James P. Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the US, had issued an "Open Letter" to the world Trotskyist movement, calling for the defence of orthodox Trotskyism.

The Pabloites had adapted to the post-World War II restabilisation of world capitalism and rejected the struggle for the political independence of the working class. Instead, they called for the liquidation of the Trotskyist parties of the Fourth International into the various Social Democratic, Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist parties that dominated the working class, under the guise of pressuring them to the left.

In countries like Sri Lanka, Pabloism abandoned the Theory of Permanent Revolution and promoted the fatal illusion that various "left" bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties and leaders could meet the social and democratic aspirations of the masses. At every step, the Pabloites encouraged and facilitated the backsliding of the LSSP, which culminated in its entry into the Bandaranaike government.

The LSSP's coalition with the SLFP represented an acceptance of the reactionary state structures established in 1947–48 on the Indian subcontinent, as a result of the deals struck by Britain with the local bourgeoisies. The LSSP abandoned the struggle to unify the working class, accepted the SLFP's divisive Sinhala populism, and promoted the dangerous illusion that its program of nationalisations and limited social welfare constituted the road to socialism. This was the antithesis of Trotsky's Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated the organic incapacity of any section of the bourgeoisie to advance the democratic and social aspirations of the masses, and insisted that the working class had to

rally the peasantry in the revolutionary struggle to abolish capitalism, as part of the fight for world socialist revolution.

The LSSP was first founded in the 1930s as a radical national movement. It opposed British colonial rule, but prominent within its ranks was a layer of intellectuals who had been won to Trotskyism. With the outbreak of World War II, they waged a struggle against a Stalinist faction within the party, which, in line with Moscow's diktats, supported Britain and the so-called democratic imperialists against Nazi Germany and its allies. The Stalinists were expelled from the party and the LSSP leaders, in preparation for the vast movement against British colonial rule that was to erupt across the region in the course of the Second World War, established the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) as the section of the Fourth International, to unify the working class throughout the Indian subcontinent, including Sri Lanka.

BLPI leaders such as Colvin R. de Silva and Leslie Goonawardene gained enormous political stature as a result of their courageous and principled struggle, both during the war and in its immediate aftermath. In opposition to an opportunist tendency that re-established the LSSP after the war, the BLPI exposed the "fake independence" granted by Britain to Sri Lanka in 1948, and the bloody partition of the subcontinent along communal lines into India and Pakistan.

However, so-called independence created new pressures on the party as opportunities opened up in business and politics for sections of the middle class. Encouraged by Michel Pablo, the BLPI became fractured along national lines. In Sri Lanka, it made a hasty fusion with the opportunist LSSP in 1950, without any discussion of the fundamental political differences between the two parties.

In November 1953, James Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the United States, issued an Open Letter to rally orthodox Trotskyists within the Fourth International against Pabloite opportunism. The LSSP had been critical of Pablo and his adaptation to Stalinism, but it rejected the Open Letter on which the ICFI was founded to fight Pabloism. To have supported the ICFI's principled stance would have cut across the LSSP's own increasingly opportunist preoccupation with the number of their parliamentary seats and trade union members.

The LSSP's abandonment of a revolutionary orientation was already evident in August 1953, when a mass movement of strikes, shop closures and protests, or "hartal," erupted and brought the government to the brink of collapse. However, the LSSP, together with the Stalinist Communist Party, called off the struggle after one day, leaving protesters to the mercy of state repression, and sought to channel the mass opposition into fresh elections. The failure of the LSSP to provide revolutionary leadership allowed the SLFP, formed in 1951, to posture as a defender of the rural masses. At the same time, the SLFP won support from a section of the bourgeoisie shocked at the uprising and looking for a stronger base for its rule.

The LSSP's decision not to support the ICFI later that year was the start of an opportunist "live-and-let-live" relationship with Pablo, Mandel and their International Secretariat (IS). As the SEP explained in its *Historical and International Foundations* document: "The LSSP could claim Trotskyist credentials for its reformist politics in the national arena, while the International Secretariat could boast of having 'a mass Trotskyist party' in Asia. The LSSP's support for Pabloism was a terrible blow against Trotskyism and thus the working class, particularly in Asia."

Over the next decade, aided and abetted by the Pabloites, the LSSP's backsliding accelerated. This took the form of an increasingly naked adaptation to the SLFP, which combined socialistic phrase-mongering with Sinhala populism and anti-Tamil chauvinism. The key turning points were:

* In the 1956 general election, the SLFP consciously whipped up anti-Tamil sentiment to divide the working class. Its communalist campaign was based on rendering Sinhala the only official language and assigning to

Buddhism, the religion of the Sinhalese majority, a special status within the state. Automatically, that meant consigning the island's minorities—Tamils and Muslims in particular—to the status of second-class citizens.

While the LSSP opposed the Sinhala-only policy, it did so on the basis that it would divide the nation, not the working class. Far from seeking to unite Sinhala and Tamil workers, the LSSP adapted to the Sinhala populist campaign and struck a "no-contest" pact with the SLFP. When the SLFP won the elections, the LSSP adopted a stance of "responsive co-operation" towards the government and voted in 1957 for the "Throne Speech" that set out government policy.

* The LSSP's shift to the right accelerated in the two elections held in 1960. In March, the LSSP explicitly abandoned a revolutionary perspective and embraced the parliamentary road to socialism, contesting 100 seats and calling for "a Samasamajist government." The Pabloite International Secretariat enthusiastically supported the LSSP, absurdly describing its election campaign as "a decisive struggle for power."

When the LSSP gained fewer seats than in 1956, its leader N.M. Perera openly advocated a coalition government with the SLFP. As the first step, he called for a "no-contest pact" with this party of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, to be followed by bringing "about a programmatic agreement with the SLFP with a view to forming a joint government."

Once again, the IS gave its political blessing, declaring it was possible "to give critical support to a non-working class government" in colonial and semi-colonial countries. While the party did not adopt Perera's proposal for a coalition with the SLFP, it did enter a no-contest pact in the July 1960 elections, and again voted for the Throne Speech.

* In June 1963, the American SWP abandoned the principled stand taken in the 1953 Open Letter and reunified with the Pabloites. Their adulation of the victory of the petty-bourgeois guerrilla movement led by Fidel Castro in Cuba, which was declared to have established a "workers' state," made clear that the SWP had fully adopted the Pabloite perspective. The newly-formed United Secretariat (USec) declared that, in countries like Cuba, it was possible to achieve power through "a blunted instrument"—that is, without a Leninist Party fighting for the independent mobilisation of the working class to take power.

The reunification congress also hailed the LSSP's plans to form a United Left Front (ULF) with the Stalinist Communist Party and the Sinhala communalist MEP (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna [People's United Front]). In forming the ULF, the LSSP dropped its earlier demand for parity of the Sinhala and Tamil languages as a concession to the MEP, and adapted to existing "Sinhala only" legislation, refusing to call for it to be overturned, but only to be made less discriminatory. The ULF, with the blessing of the Pabloites, became the springboard for the LSSP's betrayal.

Since 1961, the British Socialist Labour League (SLL) had opposed the SWP's moves towards reunification. The SLL rejected the SWP's contention that petty-bourgeois leaderships could be forced by "the logic of the revolution itself" to lead the working class to power, and emphasised that the central task confronting the Fourth International remained the resolution of the crisis of proletarian leadership, through the construction of Bolshevik-type parties.

In a letter to the SWP National Committee in June 1963, SLL leader Gerry Healy condemned its reunification with the Pabloites and specifically criticised its failure to warn the working class that the LSSP was preparing a betrayal. After noting that the MEP had opposed the representation of Tamil plantation workers at a joint May Day rally, Healy declared: "The LSSP to its eternal shame agreed to this farce. It must be remembered that in the past the LSSP was the only party in Ceylon to stand unconditionally for the equality of the Indian and Tamil working class."

The letter warned that the LSSP's capitulation to the MEP would lead to support for a bourgeois government. "It is now freely admitted in the

LSSP that the leaders are prepared to make real and large concessions on the question of parity of status for Tamil and Sinhalese. This is the logic of the capitulation which has led them to support the capitalist government of Mrs. Bandaranaike,” Healy wrote.

* Amid growing unrest in the working class, the Joint Committee of the Trade Unions (JCTUO) was formed in 1963 around 21 common demands, which, for the first time, united Tamil-speaking plantation workers with urban workers. In September 1963, several hundred delegates, representing a million workers, launched the 21-demands movement, precipitating a severe crisis for the SLFP government.

Madame Bandaranaike, who became the SLFP leader after her husband’s assassination, opened talks with the ULF leaders in March 1964. When the talks became public knowledge, the prime minister justified her decision by declaring that none of the other suggested options, including establishing a dictatorship and forcing striking workers “to work at the point of a gun and bayonet,” would “take us where we want to go.” For their part, the LSSP leaders embraced Bandaranaike’s offer, falsely declaring it to be a “leftward” move.

In order to ratify the decision to form a coalition with the SLFP, N.M. Perera called a party congress for June 6–7. While the Pabloite USec formally opposed this naked abandonment of the principles of socialist internationalism, it had paved the way, at every step, for the betrayal.

The majority, led by Perera, was opposed by a “centre”—whose only criticism was that other ULF parties should also be included in the coalition government—and a minority faction, which unambiguously denounced entry into the SLFP government as “treachery to the proletarian revolution.” After the vote—501 for Perera’s resolution, 75 for the “centre” and 159 for the opposition—those who opposed the coalition outright left the congress, met separately and formed what became the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Revolutionary) or LSSP (R).

Healy flew to Colombo to intervene in the LSSP congress. Although barred from entering the venue, he spoke to those workers and youth who were opposing the coalition. Through these political discussions, he established important contacts, who were to play a crucial role in forming the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) in 1968. The call by Healy and the ICFI to form revolutionary parties in opposition to the Pabloite betrayal was thus realised in Sri Lanka through the formation of the RCL.

To be continued



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