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

From the LSSP's Great Betrayal to the founding of the RCL

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This is the second 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.

In the immediate aftermath of the Great Betrayal in June 1964, when the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) joined the bourgeois government of Sirima Bandaranaike, the political landscape of Sri Lanka was inundated with a flood of political confusion and frustration among every section of workers, the poor and the youth.

However, even though the LSSP had called off the powerful 21-demands movement, unrest slowly began to re-emerge, among workers and particularly among university students and youth.

Private sector strikes broke out, including at the Velona garment factory, where more than a thousand workers, mostly female, faced police harassment by the coalition government. Thousands of students from Peradeniya University marched to the nearby city of Kandy, in support of the strike.

Bandaranaike's coalition government, which the LSSP and Stalinist leaders falsely promised would bring socialism, did not even last until the end of 1964. It was brought down in a parliamentary coup, organised by the right-wing United National Party (UNP).

With the UNP in power, the political radicalisation continued. Several petty-bourgeois political groups emerged among students and rural youth, such as Peradiga Sulanga (Eastern Wind), Gini Pupura (Spark), and Rathu Tharuwa (Red Star).

Prominent among these groups was the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led by Rohana Wijeweera, who had studied at the Lumumba University in the Soviet Union. Its ideology was derived from a mixture of Maoism, Castroism, Che Guevarism and Sinhala populism. All these groups rejected the international character of the political crisis that was developing in Sri Lanka and internationally, and the revolutionary role of the working class.

The main political party claiming to represent the working class was the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Revolutionary), or LSSP (R), founded by those LSSP delegates who had voted against entering the Bandaranaike government.

The resolution of the anti-coalition faction at the June 1964 LSSP congress branded collaboration with Bandaranaike's bourgeois SLFP government as "a gross contravention of the party's revolutionary program." However, by characterising the treachery of the LSSP as "acceptance of portfolios" in the coalition government, it justified the LSSP's opportunist backsliding, including its no-contest electoral pacts with the Sinhala populist SLFP, and its entry into the United Left Front with the communalist MEP.

Moreover, the LSSP (R) remained within the Pabloite United Secretariat, which was politically responsible for the LSSP's retreat from the principles of socialist internationalism over the previous decade. Central to Pabloite opportunism was the rejection of the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity of establishing Bolshevik-type parties to fight for its political independence against all the agencies of the ruling class, including bourgeois nationalism, Stalinism and Social Democracy.

The founding members of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) had initially looked to the LSSP (R), which claimed it was fighting for Trotskyism against the LSSP's betrayal. Only on the basis of the analysis advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was it possible for those who went on to form the RCL in 1968 to understand that the political roots of the LSSP's betrayal lay in its Pabloite perspective.

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party explained: "The ICFI's interventions in Sri Lanka through the SLL [British Socialist Labour League]—first by Gerry Healy in June 1964 and then by Mike Banda, editor of the SLL's *Newsletter*, in December 1964—resulted in the formation of a pro-ICFI grouping inside the LSSP (R). The LSSP (R), however, was a hostile political environment… At the first LSSP (R) conference, the entire leadership combined to block a resolution by an ICFI sympathiser to debate the "international question"—that is, the struggle waged by the ICFI against Pabloite revisionism."

Gerry Healy, who travelled to Sri Lanka to politically intervene in the LSSP Congress of June 1964, stated in his *Ceylon:The Great Betrayal*: "The LSSP revolutionary wing has now the historic task of reconstructing

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the revolutionary party in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). They will do this all the better when they understand its relationship to the past and break completely from the Unified Secretariat in Paris."

The one person who took this advice seriously was LSSP (R) Central Committee member, Wilfred Pereira, known as Spike, a veteran Trotskyist who had been a member of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India during the Second World War.

The youth who joined the LSSP (R) had to learn, through their own experiences, the farsightedness of the ICFI's analysis. During the campaign for the 1965 general election, they found they had no answers when asked "why the LSSP (R) leaders had not warned about the LSSP's betrayal until it finally happened."

The LSSP (R)'s poor election result exacerbated the crisis in the party. Leading LSSP (R) member, V. Karalasingham, exploited the situation to cultivate close relations, particularly with Peradeniya University students. In December 1965, he had provided legal aid to those being tried for their role in leading a student strike.

In his pamphlet, "Senile Leftism," Karalasingham castigated the two LSSP (R) parliamentarians for joining with the UNP in voting against the 1964 December Throne Speech and bringing down the Bandaranaike government, as a "Himalayan Blunder." He organised a new centrist group within the LSSP (R), comprised mainly of students, who began publishing a newspaper called *Shakthi* .

The Shakthi group continued the Pabloite politics of trying to pressure the LSSP and CP, which were part of the SLFP-led coalition, to the "left." On May Day 1966, Karalasingham issued an "Open Letter," published in *Shakthi*, arguing that a new SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition government would be a progressive alternative to the existing UNP regime and "would be a step on the path" to "a real revolutionary government."

Spike subjected the article to withering criticism. He pointed out that Karalasingham's proposed "intermediate regime" was nothing but a sequence of bourgeois governments, and represented a "capitulation to the existing level of consciousness of the most backward layers of the anti-UNP masses."

Exposing his real intent, Karalasingham organised a secret meeting between leading members of the Shakthi group and LSSP secretary Leslie Gunawardena. A package was worked out, deceitfully claimed to be favourable to Shakthi's members and its political line if they rejoined the LSSP—which meant becoming part of its reactionary coalition with the SLFP.

Calling a meeting of the Shakthi group, Karalasingham claimed its members could obtain leading positions in the LSSP's unions and youth organisation. He falsely likened this to an "entry tactic," as sanctioned by Leon Trotsky.

Wije Dias, with the support of another Shakhti member, rejected the proposal, insisting it would amount to a reversal of the decision taken in June 1964 to oppose the LSSP's betrayal. He explained that the LSSP's support for a racist, anti-Tamil demonstration, organised by the SLFP in January 1966, was enough to confirm the coalition's utterly reactionary role. The meeting broke up without taking a final decision.

Several members of the Shakthi group had the opportunity to meet with Tony Banda, a leading SLL member, who was in Colombo at the time. Banda explained the opportunist character of Karalasingham's "entry" politics and brought the Shakthi members into contact with Spike, who was conducting a struggle for the ICFI and genuine Trotskyism within the LSSP (R).

Those who were attracted to the ICFI's perspective formed a new group, named Virodhaya, after the newspaper that it published. Banda remained in Sri Lanka for several weeks, introducing the group to the essential history of the ICFI's struggle against Pabloism, including the split in the Fourth International in 1953 and the SLL's political fight against the US Socialist Workers Party's reunification with the Pabloites in 1963.

In these discussions, Keerthi Balasuriya, the youngest member of the Virodhaya group, aged just 19 years, emerged as the sharpest theoretical and political fighter for Trotskyism and, by the time the RCL was founded, he was indisputably regarded as the group's chief leader.

Banda insisted that special attention had to be paid to Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* in which he had grappled with the problem of building a genuine revolutionary party of the working class. It was necessary to counter the myriad petty-bourgeois radical groups flourishing at the time, which all claimed to be "adapting Marxism to the national environment." Their nationalist outlook was underpinned by a contempt for theory and their insistence that what was important were "practical successes not loads of theory."

Answering an opportunist group of his day, Lenin declared: "We can judge how tactless *Rabocheye Dyelo* is when, with an air of triumph, it quotes Marx's statement: 'Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs.' To repeat these words in a period of theoretical disorder is like wishing mourners at a funeral many happy returns of the day."

The Virodhaya group repeatedly intervened to expose the opportunism of the Pabloites. Its members challenged USec leader Ernest Mandel at his public lecture in Colombo in 1967. Asked what was the greatest political crime of the 20th century, Mandel ignored the assassination of Leon Trotsky in 1940, and named the 1963 murder of US president John Kennedy, a political representative of American imperialism.

Spike used a membership meeting of the LSSP (R), in which Mandel participated, to confront the USec leader. He accused USec of being "directly responsible for the degeneration and ultimate debacle of the LSSP." Mandel's response was to launch a witch hunt against Spike, over an editorial he had written six months previously, condemning Castro for his rabid attack on the Fourth International at a Tri-Continental Conference.

Spike stoutly defended himself, declaring that LSSP (R) leader Bala Tampoe and the Central Committee were accusing him of "lese-majeste against Fidel Castro for presuming to doubt his revolutionary bona fides." He declared that he had criticised Castro, not as an ordinary individual, but as "a proud member of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution which was founded by Leon Trotsky… I have dared to criticise Castro for trying to deceive and disorient the international working class and indirectly instigating a witch hunt of Trotskyists."

At the LSSP (R) Congress in April 1968, Spike moved a resolution for the party to break from the revisionist politics of USec and to join the International Committee. When the resolution was defeated, Spike split from the LSSP (R) and participated in the founding of the RCL.

This was a period of deepening political and economic crisis for world capitalism, which impacted Sri Lanka through a devaluation of the rupee in 1967, falling living conditions, growing social unrest and a wave of public sector strikes.

These struggles in Sri Lanka coincided with powerful class battles internationally. Beginning with the 1968 May–June general strike of French workers against the De Gaulle regime, revolutionary struggles swept across Europe in the period from 1968 to 1975, not sparing Stalinist Eastern Europe, with the "Prague Spring" in Czechoslovakia in 1968. US military forces were driven out of Vietnam. In India, in 1975, the Gandhi government resorted to emergency rule to crush the strikes and protests of workers and the rural poor.

The RCL's founding Congress was held on June 16 and 17, 1968. It discussed a report from the Third Congress of the ICFI, which had been held in 1966 in Britain. At the Third Congress, the SLL had opposed a tendency that declared that the Fourth International had been liquidated and had to be refounded. The SLL insisted that the continuity of the Fourth International had been preserved through the continuous political

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struggle against all forms of opportunism. The establishment of the RCL was living proof of the central importance of the ICFI's struggle against the Pabloite revisionism of both the LSSP and the LSSP (R).

At the RCL's founding congress, the key issue that was debated was the conception that the formation of the RCL represented the fusion of a national revolutionary current in Sri Lanka—tracing its history through the LSSP, LSSP (R) and Shakthi—with the ICFI.

Keerthi Balasuriya strongly argued against this position, emphasising that the continuity of the political movement lay in the ICFI's international struggle against Pabloism, not in a national tendency. He made clear that the founding of the RCL was only possible through the intervention of the SLL, the leading section of the ICFI, which had explained the LSSP's betrayal as part of the broader impact of Pabloism internationally.

The RCL Congress unanimously adopted a resolution declaring its full agreement with the SLL resolution that had been adopted at the Third Congress of the ICFI. It stated: "This Congress expresses its complete faith in the competence of the ICFI, acquired through its consistent struggle for the program and method of the Fourth International, to meet the new challenges of building the Fourth International as the centralised proletarian leadership.

"This Congress dedicates itself firmly to the task of building the party of the proletarian revolution in Ceylon as the section of the ICFI in the intransigent struggle against all forms of revisionism and declares that this task is inseparably bound up with the active intervention in the class struggle to the maximum possible extent in every place and under all circumstances."

The founding Congress unanimously elected Keerthi Balasuriya as the RCL's first general secretary.

To be continued

The author also recommends:

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