

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

The RCL/SEP's political struggle against petty-bourgeois radicalism

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This is the third 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 (LSSP), which claimed to be a Trotskyist party, had betrayed by entering the bourgeois government of Madame 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 theoretical and political fight against petty-bourgeois radicalism has been a central feature of the 50-year history of the Revolutionary Communist League/Socialist Equality Party (RCL/SEP) and carries crucial lessons for workers and youth in building the revolutionary party.

The RCL was established in 1968 to fight the Great Betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) which, in 1964, joined the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government of Madame Bandaranaike. By openly abandoning proletarian internationalism and embracing the SLFP's Sinhala supremacism, the LSSP opened the door for the unrestrained growth in Sri Lanka of communal politics.

Various petty-bourgeois nationalist groups emerged to exploit the resulting political confusion and gain a hearing among radicalised youth. In particular, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), or People's Liberation Front, was established in 1965, just one year after the LSSP's betrayal. Like all these groups, the JVP based itself on the glorification of "armed struggle" and an eclectic mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Guevarism—the fashionable theories of the day around the world. In opposition to Marxism, they all rejected the revolutionary role of the working class.

The LSSP (R) split from the LSSP after its betrayal, but did not break from the Pabloite opportunism embodied in the United Secretariat (USec), which had paved the way for the LSSP's political backsliding over the

previous decade. The USec was instrumental in promoting petty-bourgeois radicalism in all its forms, including guerrillaism, which had devastating consequences, especially in Latin America.

After the Bandaranaike government collapsed in 1965, the LSSP maintained its coalition with the SLFP, which was extended to the Stalinist Communist Party (CP). The SLFP-LSSP-CP exploited the growing discontent and opposition, in the working class and rural poor, towards the United National Party (UNP) government with a combination of anti-imperialist demagoguery and empty promises to return to power with a large majority in the 1970 election.

During the election, the newly-formed RCL made a tactical mistake. While denouncing the LSSP's and CP's treachery and warning of the reactionary aims of the coalition, it called for a critical vote for the SLFP-led coalition. As Michael Banda, a leader of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), explained in a letter to the RCL, its "policy was an unwarranted concession to the reformists and the radical bourgeoisie."

Banda advised the RCL to give no support to the SLFP-led government and to mobilise workers around the tactical demand that the LSSP and CP break from the coalition and fight for the formation of a workers' and peasants' government, to implement socialist policies. The tactic was aimed, not at fostering illusions in the opportunist manoeuvres and policies of the LSSP and CP, but at exposing them, thus developing the struggle for the political independence of the working class.

As *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)* explained, "The response of Keerthi Balasuriya and the RCL provides a classic example of how a Marxist party makes a principled correction. The party leadership first initiated an exhaustive inner party discussion of Banda's correspondence and the political implications of the error." Then, it publicly corrected the mistake in a statement declaring: "To force the Samasamajist and Stalinist leaders to break from the coalition government is the form that the fight for the class independence of the working class takes."

At the same time, RCL General Secretary Balasuriya understood that the mistake was the product of considerable pressure being exerted on the party by the flourishing of petty-bourgeois radicalism. The party's statement insisted on the necessity of grasping "the roots of this error because the same hostile class pressure that acted on the RCL can emerge in another form in other circumstances."

Having drawn that conclusion, Balasuriya decided to politically and theoretically expose the JVP, which was the "epitome of middle-class radicalism" in its touting of Mao, Castro and Ho Chi Minh. He wrote a series of articles in the RCL's Sinhala-language newspaper, *Kamkaru Puwath* (Workers News), titled *The Politics and Class Nature of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*, which was later published in book form.

Balasuriya noted, in his Preface to the book, that the purpose of exposing the JVP was to defend and develop Marxist theory “which is at the core of building the revolutionary party.” The RCL had been founded on the struggles of the ICFI against Pabloite revisionism, in particular the Pabloite glorification of Castro and the Cuban Revolution. The Pabloites falsely concluded that in economically backward countries, it was possible to establish a workers’ state with a “blunted instrument”—that is, without a Marxist party and the independent mobilisation of the working class.

In his book, Balasuriya explained: “The JVP—like Castro, Guevara and Mao—was organically hostile to the working class and rooted in reactionary nationalism. In the JVP’s distorted terminology, the ‘proletariat’ referred to the oppressed layers of the peasantry. The organisation belittled the economic struggles of workers as ‘struggles for cups of porridge’ that distracted from the ‘patriotic’ struggle against imperialism. Modelling itself on Castro, the JVP declared that ‘an uprising staged by a group of patriots could undermine the power of the ruling class.’”

Balasuriya explained that the JVP’s “patriotism” was nothing but “Sinhala patriotism” used by the Sri Lanka ruling class to “divide the working class” on a communal basis and to “subordinate it to the bourgeoisie.” The JVP fostered dangerous illusions in the progressive nature of the so-called national bourgeoisie. It backed the SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition, initially describing it as a “progressive government” when it won the 1970 election.

In exposing the JVP’s positions, the RCL based its analysis on Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, which insists that the national bourgeoisie in backward countries is incapable of playing a progressive role in fulfilling unsolved democratic tasks or addressing social questions. Only the working class could deal with these unresolved issues by rallying the rural poor and oppressed under its leadership and establishing a workers’ and peasants’ government, as part of the fight for world socialist revolution. This was the lesson of the victorious socialist revolution in Russia in 1917.

The JVP’s anti-imperialist demagoguery included denunciations of “Indian expansionism” and “privileged” Tamil-speaking plantation workers, whom it branded as enemies of the Sinhala workers. This virulently anti-working class and racist slander against the country’s plantation workers served the same divisive purpose as the Sinhala populism of the SLFP and its allies.

Balasuriya warned: “In a period where British imperialism and the Lankan bourgeoisie are driven by their own class interests to devastate the conditions of the plantation workers, petty-bourgeois hostility to these same workers turns into a weapon in the hands of monopoly capitalism. This racism is one that leads to fascism. The JVP is creating an anti-working class movement in Lanka, which could well be utilised in the future by a fascist movement.”

Far from being “progressive,” the second coalition government increasingly attacked the democratic and social rights of the workers and rural poor. In response, the JVP flipped from uncritically supporting the SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition to rabidly denouncing it. In April 1971, the JVP launched an adventurist insurrection of rural youth, isolated from the urban working class, which set about attacking police stations. The coalition government unleashed a police-military bloodbath in response, massacring an estimated 15,000 youth and detaining thousands, including JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera. Those detained were summarily tried by special courts and jailed for years.

The RCL took a principled stand against this brutal state repression, demanding the release of the JVP political prisoners, while continuing to expose the JVP’s reactionary policies. As a result, the coalition government targeted the RCL leadership. Two Central Committee members, Lakshman Weerakoon and L. G. Gunadasa, were arrested and killed in the Kandy prison. Police raided the house of Wilfred Pereira,

which was being used as the party’s office, and destroyed its library and documents. Under the emergency laws, the publications of the RCL and its youth wing were banned, forcing the party and its leaders to go underground.

The RCL nevertheless mounted a vigorous campaign among workers throughout the country for the release of all political prisoners. At the same time, it exposed the posturing of groups like the LSSP (R), which issued empty appeals to the government to release the JVP prisoners, but opposed the mobilisation of the working class against the government and for an end to state repression.

The RCL campaign won widespread support. Freedom for political prisoners became a major demand of the general strike against the coalition government that erupted in December 1976. In 1978, the UNP, which won the 1977 election, was compelled to free Wijeweera and other political prisoners. After his release, Wijeweera personally visited the party’s office to publicly thank the RCL.

The next four decades marked a sharp turn to the right by the JVP, confirming Balasuriya’s warnings about its political trajectory and the blind alley of petty-bourgeois radicalism. Behind this rightward turn were vast changes in world economics and politics, brought about by the globalisation of production, which was undermining all parties, organisations and institutions based on the old program of national economic regulation.

The UNP government of Prime Minister J.R. Jayewardene was among the first in the world to implement open market policies, including the gutting of social spending and the privatisation of state-owned corporations and services. Jayawardene prepared for his government’s class war against the working class by repeatedly whipping up anti-Tamil communalism and establishing an executive presidential system with sweeping autocratic powers.

In July 1980, in opposition to the government’s attacks, public sector workers launched a general strike, which Jayawardene crushed by sacking nearly 100,000 employees. The JVP played a critical role in assisting the government in isolating the striking workers, thus laying the basis for the mass sackings.

From the outset, the JVP opposed the strike, insisting that the “[working] class is not ready to fight” and that “it would invite repression.” The problem was not that workers were unwilling to fight, but that its leaderships, including the JVP, opposed transforming the strike into a political struggle against the government. Despite the JVP’s directive not to take part in the strike, the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), facing widespread anger among its members, broke from the JVP and joined the strike.

As hostility to the government continued to mount, Jayawardene staged one anti-Tamil provocation after another, culminating in island-wide pogroms in 1983 that plunged the country into a protracted communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Jayawardene banned the JVP, blaming it for the Colombo pogrom, which, in fact, was initiated by government-backed goons. The JVP nevertheless became an enthusiastic supporter of the war, substituting crude Sinhala “patriotic” appeals for its previous socialistic and pseudo-Marxist phrase-mongering.

In 1987, the Colombo government, facing a deep political crisis produced by the war and growing social unrest, turned to India to prop up its rule. The Indo-Lanka Accord devolved limited powers to the Tamil elites in the north and east of the island, while calling on the LTTE to lay down its arms. New Delhi sent 100,000 Indian “peacekeepers” to supervise the Accord and to forcibly disarm the LTTE.

The JVP immediately launched a chauvinist “Motherland first” campaign, condemning “Indian expansionism” and accusing Jayawardene of dividing the nation. The JVP organised riots against the Accord and carried out fascist attacks on anyone who refused to support its racist

campaign. JVP gunmen killed hundreds of political opponents and workers, including three RCL members, R. A. Pitawela, P. H. Gunapala and Gretian Geekiyanage.

The RCL opposed the Accord from the standpoint of defending the working class, not the Sinhala nation, and thus fought for the unity of workers in Sri Lanka and India on a common socialist perspective. With the support of the ICFI, it called for a united front of working class organisations to defend workers from the UNP government's repression and JVP fascistic attacks, and appealed to workers around the world to defend their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka.

In this struggle, the ICFI and the RCL advanced, for the first time, the perspective of the United Socialist States of Lanka and Eelam, to strengthen the campaign to unite Sinhala and Tamil workers, and as part of the fight for a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally.

After first toying with the idea of forming a coalition with the JVP, the UNP government under Jayawardene, then R. Premadasa, unleashed wholesale repression, not only against the JVP, but, above all, against the JVP's social base among alienated Sinhala rural youth. In 1989–90, the military and police slaughtered around 60,000 youth and decimated the JVP, murdering its leaders, including Wijeweera. Despite the JVP's killing of the RCL's own cadre, the RCL opposed the government's murderous campaign against the JVP on a principled basis.

In the same period, the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were liquidated, sparking a wave of triumphalism in bourgeois circles heralding the triumph of the market and the end of socialism. While the RCL and the ICFI established that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the product of the impact of globalisation and the Stalinist program of national autarchy, the JVP joined a long line of petty bourgeois radical organisations that declared the "failure of socialism."

The JVP used the opportunity to exchange its military fatigues for suits and parliamentary seats when the SLFP-led coalition under Chandrika Kumaratunga took power in 1994. As hostility grew to the two major bourgeois parties—the UNP and SLFP—the JVP functioned as a crucial political safety valve for the ruling class by deflecting the opposition of workers and youth into the dead-end of parliamentary politics.

Over the past quarter century, the JVP has completely integrated itself into the Colombo political establishment. In the 1960s and 1970s, the JVP gained a hearing among Sinhala youth by denouncing the LSSP for its coalition with the SLFP. In 2004, it entered Kumaratunga's SLFP-led government and JVP ministers assumed direct responsibility for imposing an IMF austerity program.

When the SLFP-led government of President Mahinda Rajapakse restarted the communal war against the LTTE in 2006, the JVP was its most vocal advocate, defending all the government's war crimes, right down to the final bloodbath in 2009, when tens of thousands of civilians were killed and 300,000 incarcerated.

The anti-imperialist demagogues of yesteryear have become slavish supporters of US imperialism. In 2001, the JVP backed the Bush administration's bogus "War on Terror" and invasion of Afghanistan—the first imperialist military occupation on the Indian subcontinent since the end of British rule in 1947–48. JVP leaders have repeatedly visited the US embassy in Colombo for discussions.

It is no accident that the JVP supported the January 8, 2015 regime-change operation in Colombo, orchestrated by Washington, to oust President Rajapakse and install Maithripala Sirisena in power. The US was not opposed to Rajapakse's human rights abuses, but to his close relations with China. The Sirisena government rapidly reoriented foreign policy away from Beijing and towards Washington.

The RCL/SEP's political struggle to expose the JVP and all forms of petty-bourgeois radicalism constitutes a powerful vindication of contemporary Marxism—that is, of Trotskyism, which is embodied only in

the ICFI. Its political record deserves careful study by all workers and youth seeking to find a way to fight for socialist internationalism against the ongoing depredations and calamities being produced by the capitalist profit system.



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