

Amid Sri Lanka's political crisis, the USP sets "left" trap for the working class

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The United Socialist Party (USP) in Sri Lanka has called for a "left alliance" as the country's political crisis mounts. This is part of the confusion being promoted by pseudo-left groups to block the development of an independent, working-class initiative to fight for a socialist solution to the attacks on democratic and social rights.

The fake-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) led by Wickremabahu Karunaratne has directly lined up with the right-wing United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, praising him as a great democrat. The USP is taking a different tack, together with similar groups such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), distancing itself from both ruling class factions, but opposing the mobilisation of workers on the basis of a socialist perspective.

The bitter infighting in the Colombo political establishment erupted on October 26, when President Maithripala Sirisena unconstitutionally sacked Wickremesinghe as prime minister and installed former President Mahinda Rajapakse in his place. The "unity government" between the UNP and Sirisena's faction of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) collapsed. In another unconstitutional step, Sirisena attempted to dissolve parliament and call fresh elections—a move that the Supreme Court temporarily prevented.

The clash between two factions of the ruling class, desperate to grab state power, is taking increasingly violent forms, even as they both falsely claim to defend democracy.

A November 16 USP statement, signed by its general secretary Siritunga Jayasuriya, declared: "In the last two and half weeks, Sri Lanka has seen an unprecedented political crisis instigated by desperate power-hungry capitalist rulers." Though the clash was between a "few cliques at the top of the ruling class," it affected "the lives of ordinary working people and the oppressed minorities."

The conflict between the presidency and the elected legislature was "threatening the very edifice of bourgeois democracy in this country" and could "lead to mayhem and blood on the streets."

To appeal to widespread popular disgust and alienation,

the USP superficially reduces the ruling elite's infighting to the actions of "power hungry capitalist rulers," as if the crisis were simply motivated by subjective desires. It offers no explanation for the rift between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe, whose joint government ruled the country for three years, and to which the USP extended de facto support. Nor does the USP explain why Sirisena is now aligned with his arch-rival Rajapakse, whom he ousted in a US-backed regime change operation in 2015.

Reducing the present crisis to a clash of conniving and ambitious individuals serves a definite political purpose in deliberately obscuring the class interests they represent. The USP is covering up the depth of the political crisis of the ruling class as a whole and, thus, the dangers and political tasks that the working class confronts.

The USP's call for a left alliance is aimed at promoting the dangerous illusion that one or other of the two factions can be pressured to defend the rights of working people. Just three years ago, the USP lined up behind Sirisena and Wickremesinghe in ousting Rajapakse, proclaiming them to be the "lesser evil." It declared, "one must dare even to join the devil to fight the common enemy" (see: "The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) replies to the United Socialist Party").

With the UNP now thoroughly discredited, after three years of implementing the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity program, the USP is singing a slightly different tune. It has not explained its previous orientation to the UNP, nor fundamentally changed political course.

The USP's call for a left alliance is supported by a list of fake-left groups, including the FSP, Sri Lanka Socialist Party, Marxist-Leninist New Democratic Party, Left Voice, Revolutionary Socialist Centre and post-modernist Praxis Collective. All share its bankrupt political orientation. Significantly, the FSP has appealed to the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is openly backing the UNP, to join the alliance

The real reasons for the political crisis lie in the resurgence of the class struggle in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Workers, the rural poor and young people have begun to fight against the attacks on their living conditions. Amid a mounting global economic crisis and foreign debt, the ruling class is being torn into rival factions over how best to crush this opposition by working people.

USP leader Jayasuriya laments that factional rivalry is “threatening the very edifice of bourgeois democracy” as if there were a blooming parliamentary democracy. In reality, both the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe “unity” government and the previous Rajapakse government never hesitated to use police-state measures against striking workers and other protests.

The USP is organically incapable of telling the working class the truth: that the only way to defend basic democratic and social rights is to rely on its own independent strength and turn to the oppressed masses on the basis of a revolutionary socialist program.

Like all pseudo-left groups, the USP rejects the fundamental Marxist position that the working class is the only consistently revolutionary class in capitalist society. In fact, this party joined other “left” groups and trade unions over the past three years to do everything it could to derail the struggles of workers by steering them into trying to pressure the government.

The political crisis is also bound up with escalating geopolitical tensions, in particular the Trump administration’s aggressive confrontation with China. On this issue, the USP is completely silent, because it raises the inconvenient question as to why the USP backed the US-instigated ouster of Rajapakse in 2015 over his government’s close relations with China.

At present, the US is backing Wickremesinghe and has made clear that it wants to deepen the political and military relations developed under the “unity” government. However, last week the leaders of Rajapakse’s faction met with foreign diplomats, including from the US, Canada, Germany and Britain, to seek their support.

Putting on a “left” face, the USP statement calls on workers, youth and the oppressed masses “to come forward to find their own solution to the crisis” and “appear on the political scene with their own demands and be prepared to put forward an anti-capitalist program.”

What a cynical ploy! The call for an “anti-capitalist program” is completely devoid of any socialist or revolutionary content. What the USP presents is a shopping list of limited demands—opposition to the privatisation of education, health and state-owned ventures, more subsidies and guaranteed prices for farmers and peasants, and support for the families of detainees and the “disappeared”—directed to the government that bears full responsibility for these attacks.

The USP relegates any socialist measures to the distant future, declaring: “There is no way out for the poor masses in Sri Lanka within the bankrupt capitalist system, and there is a great need to fight to build a broader mass working class party to prepare a long-term strategy to establish a workers’ government.”

Terrified that a revolutionary situation is emerging, the USP dismisses that prospect. Jayasuriya declares: “As Marxists we are aware that there can be no mechanical comparison of the situation to the one in pre-Revolutionary Russia of 1917... We recognise we are not even near that situation, but if this anarchic situation prevails, it can develop into a pre-revolutionary situation.”

While obviously no exact parallels can be drawn, the Russian Revolution holds extremely important lessons for the working class. The revolutionary struggles of 1917, which led to the establishment of the first workers’ state, were developed and led by the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky. They waged an indefatigable political fight to expose the compromisers, opportunists and fake-lefts, who propped up the bourgeois provisional government in Russia.

The Russian Revolution erupted in February 1917 under the intolerable conditions and oppression produced by the breakdown of world capitalism and the eruption of World War I, in which the Tsarist empire was engaged. Today, the world is once again wracked by rapidly sharpening geopolitical rivalries that are driving toward a new and even more terrible conflagration. They are also, however, fueling a resurgence of class struggle internationally.

Workers, youth and progressive-minded intelligentsia should reject with contempt the latest “left” manoeuvre by the USP and its allies, aimed at confining the working class to futile appeals to the bourgeois establishment. To ensure their basic democratic and social rights, workers must place the banner of socialism and the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government at the very centre of their struggles. To prepare for the battles ahead, the working class needs to build the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, as the revolutionary leadership required to mobilise and unify its struggles in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally.



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