

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

Victory of the Trotskyists in the 1985–1986 split in the ICFI

Saman Gunadasa, K. Ratnayake
29 December 2018

PART ONE | PART TWO | PART THREE | PART FOUR | PART FIVE | PART SIX

This is the six and final part 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 been published to mark the RCL's founding congress on June 16–17, 1968.

These articles 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 1985–1986 split in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was a milestone for the international Trotskyist movement and all its sections. The split marked the decisive victory of the genuine Trotskyists and the program of socialist internationalism over the national opportunists of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) and its supporters who betrayed the basic tenets of Trotskyism, including the theory of the Permanent Revolution.

The political struggle against the WRP prepared the ICFI for the new period of revolutionary struggles that are emerging. In the wake of the split, the ICFI identified that its underlying causes in the globalisation of production immensely sharpened the fundamental contradictions of capitalism—between world economy and the outmoded nation state system, and between socialised production and the private ownership of the means of production. These are the impetus not only for the drive of the ruling classes towards war, austerity and dictatorship, but also for the revolutionary resurgence of the international working class.

The Socialist Labor League (SLL) in Britain, the forerunner of the WRP, played a critical role in defending the Fourth International against Pabloite opposition that first emerged in the 1950s. The Pabloites reacted to the post-war restabilisation of capitalism by abandoning the struggle for the political independence of the working class and adapting to the Social Democratic, Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist tendencies that prevailed

in each country.

The SLL's leading members had supported the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the US in its struggle against the Pabloites and the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953. The SLL took up a far-sighted and courageous political fight against the SWP in the early 1960s, which succumbing to similar political pressures as the Pabloites reunified with them in 1963.

The LSSP's betrayal in 1964 was a striking confirmation of the SLL's warnings about the dangers of Pabloite opportunism. The SLL's analysis formed the basis on which the RCL cadre was assembled and the party formed in 1968. Similarly, drawing inspiration from the lessons of the 1953 and 1963 struggles, new sections of the ICFI were established in the United States, Germany and Australia in the 1960s and early 1970s.

However, in the course of the revolutionary upheavals between 1968 and 1975, the SLL adapted to the enormous pressures exerted by imperialism. Its transformation into the WRP in 1973 on the basis of an anti-Tory tactic and without the necessary discussion of programmatic foundations signalled an adaptation to the Labour Party and the trade unions. Increasingly, the WRP jettisoned the theory of Permanent Revolution as it established unprincipled relations with various bourgeois nationalist regimes and movements in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The political standing of the SLL/WRP rested on its fight against Pabloism, but, as it abandoned the lessons of those struggles it increasingly came into conflict with the new ICFI sections that had been established on the basis of these vital theoretical advances.

The RCL disagreed sharply in 1971 with the SLL's assessment of the Indo-Pakistan war published in a statement giving “critical support” to the Indian invasion of what was then East Pakistan under the guise of assisting the Bangladesh liberation struggle. New Delhi's real concerns were that the conflict would spill over the border into West Bengal and destabilise the reactionary nation state system established in 1947 following formal independence from Britain.

The RCL, which was not consulted and was operating under conditions of semi-legality, had already prepared a statement declaring that “the task of the proletariat is not that of supporting one or other faction of the bourgeoisie,” but of exploiting the conflicts in the enemy camp for the seizure of power.

The RCL did not publish its statement, but General Secretary Keerthi Balasuriya wrote to ICFI Secretary Cliff Slaughter outlining its strong opposition to the SLL statement and called for an international discussion over the issues. Mike Banda on behalf of the SLL attacked the RCL and attributed a “progressive” and “revolutionary” role to Indian national bourgeoisie that was completely at odds with the theory of Permanent Revolution. The SLL did not even circulate the RCL's letter to the IC sections and increasingly sought to isolate it.

The RCL came directly into conflict with the SLL/WRP over its adaptation to the bourgeois nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighting for a separate Tamil state in the North and East of the island. Having initially opposed the RCL's tactical support for the right to self-determination of Tamils as part of the fight for socialist internationalism, the WRP did a 180 degree about face in 1979. It gave uncritical support to the LTTE's campaign for a separate state and, grossly distorting Lenin's writings, dressed up the LTTE's bourgeois program in socialistic colours. These issues are dealt with in detail in Part 5.

The WRP's hostility to the RCL became evident at the height of the bloody anti-Tamil pogrom in July 1983 in Colombo and throughout the island that triggered the country's protracted communal civil war. In August 1983, the WRP wrote in its *News Line*: "It is possible and even probable, that the police and the army have used the arbitrary and uncontrolled power granted to them under the emergency laws to kill our comrades and destroy our press."

This astonishing statement was published but the WRP did nothing to defend the RCL or even find out about its cadre. Balasuriya later commented: "You did absolutely nothing to mount a campaign in our defense and thus gave advance notice to the UNP government that you will not even lift a finger in the event of the physical destruction of our party."

The WRP increasingly sought to destroy the ICFI and its sections as their fight for Trotskyist principles cut across the WRP's increasingly opportunist relations. While giving uncritical support to the LTTE, the WRP also maintained relations with a group of ex-RCL members who had split from the party and attacked it in Sinhala chauvinist terms. The WRP used the scurrilous claims of this group to attack the RCL leadership for supposed liquidationism and as the basis for threatening its expulsion from the ICFI.

The Workers League in the United States and its national secretary David North was also under fire. In 1982, North had criticised SLL leader Gerry Healy's *Studies in Dialectical Materialism*, explaining that they reflected the abandonment of historical materialism and "growing signs of a political drift towards positions quite similar—both in conclusions and methodology—to those which we have historically associated with Pabloism."

Again in 1984, North criticised the WRP leadership's opportunist relations with various bourgeois nationalist regimes, including in the Middle East, and the abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution and betrayal of the oppressed masses. The WRP blocked any discussion within the ICFI over these issues and threatened to split from the Workers League unless North retracted his criticisms.

The eruption of a deep crisis within the WRP in July–October tore its leadership apart. The ICFI intervened and, on the basis of the theoretical and political critique developed by North, was able to identify the roots of the crisis in the WRP's drift from the fundamental principles of Trotskyism. Keerthi Balasuriya travelled to London to participate in an emergency meeting of the ICFI and, together with leaders of the Australian and German sections, expressed his agreement with North's criticisms.

In its statements on the crisis in the British section, the ICFI noted that it was the product of a "prolonged drift of the WRP leadership away from strategic task of building the world party of socialist revolution towards increasingly nationalist perspective and practice." It required that the WRP re-register its members on the basis of the explicit recognition of the political authority of the ICFI and the subordination of the British section to its decision.

In December 1985, the ICFI received the report of its control commission into the WRP's financial dealings and passed a resolution suspending the WRP over its historic betrayal of the principles of

Trotskyism, pending an emergency ICFI congress. In another resolution it reaffirmed the programmatic foundation and correctness of the protracted struggle against Pabloism.

Of the WRP's delegates only David Hyland, who led a minority within the WRP that supported the ICFI, voted for the resolutions. At its rump congress in February 1986, the WRP used the police to exclude the minority faction and split from the ICFI, rejecting its entire history of struggle in which the SLL had previously played such a crucial part.

The split in the ICFI brought to the end what had been a three-decade civil war in the Fourth International beginning with the 1953 split and paved way for a renaissance of Marxism and the development of the closest international collaboration. The victory the genuine Trotskyists had a profound objective base in the processes of globalisation that had completely undermine all national programs.

In its 1988 perspective document, entitled *The World Capitalist Crisis and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, the ICFI identified a wave of renunciationism that was sweeping the workers' movement internationally. The trade unions, Social Democratic and Stalinist parties, and various revisionist groups were all abandoning even their previous limited claims to defend the interests of the working class.

This was epitomised in the dissolution of the deformed workers states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union by the Stalinist regimes and their wholesale embrace of capitalist restoration. Amid the wave of triumphalism about the victory of the market, the ICFI insisted that what had failed was not socialism, but the reactionary Stalinist perspective of "socialism in one country."

These new developments posed a crucial task before the ICFI. Its sections had taken the form of leagues under conditions where the trade unions and Stalinist and social democratic parties still commanded the positive support and allegiance of broad layers of workers and youth. The immediate political task was to expose these leaderships as incapable of advancing the fight for socialism. In Sri Lanka, the RCL advanced the demand that the LSSP and CPSL break from the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party and establish a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

The ICFI, following the wholesale transformation of the traditional organisations of the working class into direct agents of the national bourgeoisie in every country, concluded, however, that its sections must shoulder the responsibility of providing revolutionary leadership to the working class in the struggle for power. Each of the sections transformed itself from a league into a party, with the RCL becoming the Socialist Equality Party in 1996.

The 1988 ICFI perspective document explained that Marxism had long held the proposition that the class struggle is national in form but international in essence. However, it predicted that "given the new features of capitalist development, even the *form* of the class struggle must assume an international character."

The establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) in 1998 was a critical step in providing a medium for educating, unifying and mobilising the working class on the basis of socialist internationalism. For more than two decades, the WSWS has published an extraordinary output of article and commentary in a growing number of languages on political events, as well as theoretical and historical issues, cultural and scientific developments. It provides the necessary theoretical, political and practical guidance that is vital in the developing struggles of the working class.

The ICFI's analysis has been powerfully vindicated in the resurgence of international class struggle against sharpening geo-political rivalry and the drive to world war, the deep inroads being made into living standards, and the destruction of basic democratic rights and turn to autocratic methods of rule.

The founding document of the Fourth International declared 80 years ago: "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterised by

the crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.”

In its 50 years, the RCL/SEP has assimilated the lessons of the historical and strategic experiences that are embodied in the ICFI. Its struggles have been thoroughly grounded on the theory of Permanent Revolution and dedicated to resolving the crisis of leadership of the working class. All the other parties that once claimed allegiance to socialism have wound up in the camp of capitalism in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Together with its sister parties, the SEP in Sri Lanka has proven historically that it alone is able to provide the necessary revolutionary leadership to the working class in Sri Lanka as part of struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. We urge workers, youth and progressive minded intellectuals to take up the task of building the SEP and ICFI by joining its ranks and taking up the fight for a socialist future.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact