

Drawing the lessons of the ICFI split—International Strategy and National Tactics: The change in the ICFI’s approach to national liberation movements

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This lecture was delivered to the Socialist Equality Party (US) Summer School on July 25, 2019 by Deepal Jayasekera, Assistant Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka.

I would like to examine some of the political issues that emerged after the 1985–86 split with the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) renegades, which opened up a new period for the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL). After years of almost complete isolation and political attacks by the WRP, the RCL was able to strengthen its political line and its interventions into the working class through its close collaboration with the International Committee (IC). This was particularly the case after the premature death of comrade Keerthi Balasuriya in 1987, which was an enormous blow to the RCL, and to the IC as a whole. I believe that the political developments that were made will have great significance for the working class in other countries of a belated capitalist development—in Asia and beyond. I will focus, in particular, on our attitude to the various national liberation movements.

The turn away by the Socialist Labour League (SLL)/WRP from the Theory of Permanent Revolution, and its politically compromised attitude towards the national liberation movements and Maoism, and later prostration before them, had a significant impact upon the RCL’s political work.

The SLL’s capitulation to the national bourgeoisie in the backward countries led to sharp differences with the RCL, when Michael Banda published a statement in the IC’s name, granting “critical support” to the Indian army’s intervention into East Pakistan, under the pretext of supporting the Bangladeshi liberation movement in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war. The RCL, under the leadership of comrade Keerthi, prepared a statement that contradicted Banda’s approach. It said:

The task of the proletariat is not that of supporting any one of the warring factions of the bourgeoisie, but of utilising each and every conflict in the camp of the class enemy for the seizure of power, with the perspective of setting up a federated socialist republic that alone would be able to satisfy the social and national aspirations of the millions of toilers in the subcontinent. [1]

Once he learned of the IC statement, Keerthi immediately wrote to Cliff Slaughter, the ICFI secretary, informing him of the RCL’s firm opposition.

It is not possible to support the national liberation struggle of the Bengali people and the voluntary unification of India on socialist foundations, without opposing the Indo-Pakistan war. Without opposing the war from within India and Pakistan, it is completely absurd to talk about a unified socialist India, which alone can safeguard the right of self-determination of the many nations of the Indian subcontinent. [2]

However, expressing his principled internationalism, Keerthi withheld the RCL statement and requested a discussion within the IC on the RCL’s differences with the IC’s stance. He wrote:

It need not be stated that it is difficult to defend the IC statement. Nevertheless, clarity inside the International is more important than anything else, for it is impossible for us to build a national section without fighting to build the International. [3]

The SLL leadership deliberately blocked such a discussion and concealed the RCL’s letter from the other sections.

In the same manner, the RCL’s principled stand on the national question, which was based, from very beginning, on the Theory of Permanent Revolution, also came under enormous pressure from the SLL/WRP. The RCL had developed a consistent record of fighting against the anti-Tamil discrimination carried out by successive Colombo governments, and also against all forms of nationalism and racism, on the basis of uniting Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers on the island on a socialist program and perspective.

In the early 1970s, the RCL called for the withdrawal of troops from the north and east of the island. Issuing a statement in June 1972, the RCL, while “recognizing the right of the Tamil nation to self-determination,” also emphasised: “[T]his right can only be won by mobilising the Sinhalese and Tamil workers for the establishment of a workers and peasants government, based on socialist policies and recognising this very same right.” [4] In this, the RCL was not *advocating* a separate Tamil state, but rather *defending* the right of the Tamils to such a state.

In an ICFI meeting in 1972, however, the SLL leadership, particularly Banda, thoroughly opposed the RCL’s stand, branding support for the right of self-determination for the Tamils as assisting the imperialists’ plans for the carving up of the island. As in the case of his support for the Indian military intervention in East Pakistan in 1971, Banda’s position

was based on defending the so-called “independent” nation states, established by imperialism in South Asia in 1947–48.

However, the RCL reluctantly withdrew its defence of the right of the Tamils to self-determination, acceding to the experience and political authority of the SLL leadership. While the RCL continued to defend the democratic rights of the Tamil population and fight for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers, on the basis of socialist policies, its principled struggle during much of the 1970s was hampered by the SLL leadership’s moves to deny it the important tactical weapon of defending the right of self-determination.

But in 1979, when the Tamil national liberation struggle achieved international significance, the WRP made a 180-degree turn, rushing to uncritically embrace the petty-bourgeois Tamil nationalist groups. In line with its unprincipled relations with the Arab bourgeoisie, the WRP established connections with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), even providing it with “socialist” colourings, and trying to impose on the RCL the line of embracing Tamil nationalism and the LTTE.

In 1983, with the Colombo government in deep crisis, as a result of its turn to pro-market policies, it dramatically escalated its anti-Tamil provocations into an island-wide pogrom, which claimed the lives of hundreds. The RCL was the only organisation that opposed this orgy of violence, calling for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers. The WRP did not even bother to inquire as to the fate of the RCL’s members, let alone defend the RCL. It simply speculated in its press about the fact that the RCL may well have perished. This was the start of the protracted civil war in Sri Lanka that only ended in 2009.

The RCL continued its courageous political struggle to defend the democratic rights of the Tamils and to unite the working class on the island, cutting across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communal lines, on the basis of the fight for a socialist program and perspective. But the WRP’s uncritical support for the LTTE prevented the RCL from making any serious examination of the politics of the Tamil separatist groups, including the LTTE.

Only after the 1985–86 split, were the RCL and the ICFI able to begin a serious examination of the national question and the political perspectives of the Sri Lankan section in relation to it. The RCL’s documents on the Indian military intervention in then East Pakistan, in 1971, were published in the *Fourth International* in March 1987.

In July 1987, Sri Lankan President J. R. Jayewardene, facing a deep crisis as a result of the war, signed the “Indo-Lanka Accord” with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Under that Accord, Indian troops were brought to the north and eastern provinces of the island to disarm the Tamil armed groups and suppress any opposition to the Accord. Sri Lankan troops, released from the north and east, were unleashed in the south, to deal with growing social opposition from the working class and, particularly, rural youth.

Only the RCL opposed the Indo-Lanka Accord, on the basis of working class internationalism, against the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which launched a campaign against it from the standpoint of Sinhala chauvinism, and the Lankan Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and Pabloite Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which lined up with Jayewardene’s moves, claiming they would bring peace to the island, thus solving the national question. The RCL fought to unite the working class in Sri Lanka and India against the Accord and India’s military intervention.

The RCL’s political line on the national question developed out of these extensive discussions with the IC, which correctly placed the predominance of international strategy over national tactics.

In November 1987, the ICFI published a comprehensive statement entitled *The Situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the Revolutionary Communist League*. Firmly based on Trotsky’s Theory of

Permanent Revolution, this statement established that the democratic rights of the island’s Tamils could be achieved only through a unified struggle of the working class that cut across Sinhala and Tamil communal lines, in support of socialism. It raised, for the first time, the call for the United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam.

Pointing out the vicious nature of the national bourgeoisie, as revealed by the Indo-Lanka Accord, the statement declared:

In the unlikely event that the countless tragic experiences of this century have not already sufficiently demonstrated the perfidious and reactionary character of the national bourgeoisie in the backward countries, the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord, and the Indian invasion of the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka, provide yet another bitter lesson to the oppressed toilers. ... The policies of Jayewardene and Gandhi have shattered whatever still remained of the myth that the national bourgeoisies of India and Sri Lanka have any progressive role to play in the future of their two countries. [5]

Drawing the necessary historical lessons, the ICFI statement insisted:

Invariably, imperialist-sanctioned “independence” has meant the setting up of bastard states, whose very foundations have been built upon a fatal compromise of democratic principles. In this process, the national bourgeoisie has functioned, not as the liberator of the oppressed masses, but as a junior partner in imperialist plunder. The type of state created in this process has been nothing more than a prison ground for putrefying capitalism, upon which the progressive development of the productive forces has been impossible. [6]

The document also explained how the bankruptcy of petty-bourgeois nationalism had been revealed through the LTTE’s capitulation to the Indian bourgeoisie:

In times of historical crisis, when the fate of an entire people hangs in the balance, there is no place for sentimentality. Sympathy for the plight of the LTTE, and concern for the fate of its fighters, are no excuse for failing to say what must be said: the policies of the Liberation Tigers are principally responsible for the grave setbacks which the national struggle has suffered since July 29, 1987. [7]

The statement continued:

It [the working class] is the only social force that can realise the right of nations to self-determination. However, it does this not as an appendage to the national bourgeoisie, but rather as its implacable enemy. It fights for self-determination with its own weapons and on the basis of its own program, rallying behind it all the oppressed masses of the villages and countryside. Self-determination is achieved as a by-product of the socialist revolution, led by the proletariat which, having established its dictatorship, guarantees to all oppressed people their legitimate democratic rights... This is the essential content of the program

advanced by the Revolutionary Communist League for a United Socialist States of Tamil Eelam and Sri Lanka. [8]

The only other opposition to the Indo-Lankan Accord was the Sinhala chauvinist standpoint of the JVP, which accused the government of splitting the country and demanded that workers join their strikes and protests, at the point of a gun. By late 1988, the JVP thugs were carrying out murderous attacks against the working class in general, and trade unionists and LSSP, CP and NSSP leaders and members, in particular. JVP assassins killed three RCL members. The JVP's murderous fascist attacks against the working class were in conformity with the UNP government's police-military mobilisation against the working class.

In late 1988, the RCL and the IC developed a very important tactical initiative, aimed at mobilising the working class independently, by calling for a united front of all working class parties and organisations against the JVP's fascist attacks and the UNP government's military-police repression. The RCL fought to mobilise the working class independently, as a united movement against bourgeois rule, and rally all the oppressed masses, including the poor peasants, around the working class, in a struggle to overthrow capitalist rule and establish a government of the workers and peasantry, which would carry out socialist policies.

A vital discussion emerged over the RCL's attitude to the social base of the JVP—the peasantry and unemployed Sinhala youth in the south of the island. It was critical in clarifying the attitude of the revolutionary party of the working class towards the peasantry. The IC correctly identified a tendency, in the RCL's writings, to be indifferent to the Colombo government's mass killings of JVP supporters, which was a general terror campaign against the peasantry. Some 60,000 youth were slaughtered in the course of this campaign.

During the discussions, David North explained:

While the proletarian dictatorship presents a steel fist to the overthrown bourgeoisie, it extends a helping hand to the oppressed peasantry. The Bolsheviks always described the regime created in October 1917 as a proletarian dictatorship, resting on the support of the impoverished peasantry. While the proletariat ruled over and repressed the bourgeoisie, the proletarian dictatorship was based on an alliance between the urban workers and the poor peasants.

Further clarifying the issue, he said:

As your statement demonstrates in the pages that follow, the RCL recognizes the need to advance a rural program, in order to rally the impoverished peasants to the side of the working class. However, this task is undermined if we carelessly allow the poor peasants to draw hostile inferences from our invocation of the proletariat's "historical justification" to rule "over every other class," and fail to make the necessary distinction between the significance of the proletarian dictatorship for the bourgeoisie and its significance for the oppressed peasantry. [9]

North objected to an RCL statement about the killing of JVP leader Wijeweera, which failed to take into account the broader repression against the JVP's social base—the peasantry and rural youth.

[I]t is not a matter of passing moral judgement on Wijeweera,

but understanding the social foundation of this movement. We have not the slightest sympathy for Wijeweera and we don't mourn his demise. But we have to understand that the problem of the JVP cannot be understood except from the standpoint of the complex social relations of Sri Lanka and the backward countries in general. [10]

North correctly pointed out that it was the betrayal of the LSSP and its indifference to the peasantry that had laid the basis for the JVP. The RCL could not travel down the same path.

This issue was further discussed at a plenum of a delegation from the RCL Central Committee, held with David North on November 6–9, 1990. This led to an international campaign against the slaughter that was taking place in southern Sri Lanka.

Based upon the political and theoretical clarifications achieved by the above discussions, the RCL issued a statement, calling on the working class to intervene, as an independent political force, to put an end to the state massacre of rural youth in the South, and the renewed war against the Tamil masses in the North. It also pointed out that the defence of the rural masses against state terror, was indissolubly bound up with the struggle to overthrow bourgeois rule and establish a workers and peasants government, in the form of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

This became the basis for an extensive campaign by the RCL, and by all the sections of the IC.

With direct reference to the RCL's perspectives for Sri Lanka and the broader South Asian region, the ICFI began a critical re-examination of the national question, based upon the eruption of separatist movements in the Balkans, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, in the early 1990s.

At the 13th Plenum of the ICFI, held in June 1993, the IC held extensive discussions relating to its program on the national question and particularly its attitude towards "self-determination."

David North noted:

The historical-materialist approach to the question of self-determination—to nationalism in general—that refuses to attribute to any social phenomenon a supra-historical or timeless quality, was, in fact, fully indicated by Lenin in his specific and historically-precise definition of what he referred to as "three types of countries with respect to the self-determination of nations."

When he advocated the "right of nations to self-determination," in his 1913–16 writings on the national question, in which he referred to "three types of countries with respect to the self-determination of nations," Lenin did so as a means of fighting to unite the working class, cutting across ethnic lines and rallying the support of the oppressed nationalities for the struggle against Tsarism and imperialism. His position had always been conditional upon the level of social and economic development, and the class struggle. In 1913, when he advocated the right of self-determination in the Russian Empire, the Balkans and Eastern Europe, these countries were still mostly agrarian, with the development of capitalism and the national movement in their early stages. [11]

After more than a century, all these regions have undergone vast changes, as has the world as a whole.

Pointing to the profound changes in the condition of the countries in this third category—in Asia and Africa, North stated:

Are there any countries or groups of countries which actually correspond to the situation that existed at the time Lenin defined this category? To ask the question is to answer it. Clearly the Asia or the Africa of 1913 or 1914 has been vastly transformed. New movements, along various ethnic, communal and also religious lines, emerged in those regions as a result of the abject failure of the nationalist movements—which gained “independence” after World War II—to resolve any of the basic democratic tasks. [12]

Taking India as an expression of this general process, North explained:

Out of the disintegration of the bourgeois national project in India, or, to put it differently, precisely because the Indian bourgeoisie was incapable of either achieving genuine national unification or liberating India from imperialist domination, we have, on the basis of the corpse of this state, the re-emergence of all sorts of fissiparous and separatist movements, which in no sense embody any of the universalist strivings that characterized the revolutionary nationalist movements of the first half of the century. [13]

In the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, small cliques of ex-Stalinist bureaucrats and capitalists were whipping up various communal and ethnic divisions, in order to carve out territories for themselves as part of capitalist restoration.

None of these new nationalist separatist movements had an anti-imperialist or historically progressive character. Rather, they were actively seeking the patronage of the imperialists and separate deals with global capital, offering safe havens for foreign multi-national corporations.

North commented:

The development of multi-national production gives to countless states, or countless grouplets, possibilities that they never had before. The process of economic development, the mobility of capital, does make it possible for some national groupings—ethnic groupings of some sort or another, even within a very small area, depending on how they link up with international capital—to achieve certain gains on the basis of independence. After all Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong are models. [14]

In the discussion, RCL General Secretary Wije Dias said:

The question of national democratic rights has to be approached by revolutionaries as part of a world socialist program, for which the Marxist movement—the Trotskyist movement—fights. We have always stressed that these democratic tasks can be realized only as a by-product of the socialist revolution. Therefore, national democratic rights can only be realized as a by-product of the world socialist revolution. There is no national path to achieving national democratic rights. There are no national roads to national emancipation or liberation. [15]

Arguing for a change in the ICFI’s attitude towards the slogan of “self-determination,” under conditions of the vast transformations in the world situation, David North declared:

Communal, ethnic and chauvinist movements hide behind democratic phraseology—the slogan of self-determination, national liberation—while they pursue a policy whose economic content is the renewed enslavement of the broad masses by imperialism. They are directed not toward national liberation, in the sense that this term was understood in an earlier historical period, but to wipe out even the limited gains that were previously made by the masses. [16]

Through the political and theoretical clarification achieved in the course of this discussion, the ICFI decided that, in order to fight to unify the working class, it must take a critical, even hostile, attitude towards the emergence of various national separatist movements and their advocacy of “the right to self-determination,” to justify the formation of separate bourgeois states—in most cases, statelets—like the LTTE.

The ICFI explained:

The central question here is, how does the revolutionary party of the working class respond to the breakup of the old bourgeois nationalist movements? Are the masses in these countries to advance their interests through new separatist movements, based on fragments of the states created through decolonisation and founded on religious particularism?

We categorically reject such a perspective. Such statelets will provide no way forward for the working class and the oppressed masses of India or anywhere else. At best they will create profits for a thin layer of the privileged classes, if they are able to create a free trade zone and cut their own deals with transnational capital. For the masses, they hold out the prospect only of ethnic bloodbaths and intensified exploitation. [17]

The RCL continued with its principled and courageous opposition to the anti-Tamil racialist war carried out by successive governments in Colombo, and its defence of the democratic rights of the oppressed Tamil masses, while opposing the LTTE’s separatist program. The party has continued to fight tirelessly to unite the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—to establish a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, by overthrowing bourgeois rule.

Footnotes:

[1] “Revolutionary Communist League Statement,” December 8, 1971, *Fourth International*, March 1987, p. 37.

[2] “Letter from the RCL to Cliff Slaughter,” December 16, 1971, *Fourth International*, March 1987, p. 42.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[4] *The Historical & International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party Sri Lanka*, Mehring Books, 2012, p. 102.

[5] “The Situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the Revolutionary Communist League,” International Committee of the Fourth International Statement, *Fourth International*, January–March 1988, p. 18.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[9] “Letter from David North to Wije Dias,” December 27, 1988, *Political Chronology of the International Committee of the Fourth International 1982–1991*, p. 55.

[10] “Meeting of the RCL Political Committee,” March 3–8, 1990, *Political Chronology of the International Committee of the Fourth International 1982–1991*, pp. 80–81.

[11] "Perspectives and Tasks of the ICFI: The Permanent Revolution Today," *13th Plenum of the ICFI Essen, June 1–7, 1993*.

[12] Ibid. p. 2.

[13] Ibid. p. 4

[14] Ibid. pp. 18–19.

[15] Ibid. p. 11

[16] Ibid. p. 34.

[17] *Globalisation and the International Working Class: A Marxist Assessment*, Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, Mehring Books, 1998, p. 115



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