

Pseudo-left Fourth International Bureau announces suspension of NSSP

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
25 November 2020

The Fourth International Bureau (FIB), the executive body of the international Pabloite organisation, announced last month the suspension of its Sri Lankan section, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), adding that its next world congress would decide on the disaffiliation of the NSSP.

The FIB's decision to dissociate itself from the NSSP's opportunism is utterly cynical. For three decades, the Pabloites have sanctioned every opportunist twist and turn of their Sri Lankan affiliate as it has sought to subordinate the working class to one or other section of the ruling class and its two major parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

The FIB only suspended the NSSP after its leader Wickremabahu Karunaratne contested the August 5 general election in Sri Lanka on the ticket of the UNP—the country's oldest bourgeois party with a long history of attacks on the working class, anti-democratic methods and lining up with US imperialism.

The NSSP justified its action by absurdly declaring that the UNP was a “social democratic party”—that is, a reformist party based in the working class—and that it was in a “united front” with the UNP to fight against the “fascism of the [President] Gotabhaya Rajapakse camp.”

In its statement, the FIB self-righteously declared that the UNP was not a social democratic party and that the NSSP had broken from their “core principles,” including the “political independence of the working class.”

The FIB statement has the character of rats deserting a sinking ship. The Pabloites were well aware that the NSSP had been shamelessly promoting the UNP as a defender of democratic rights for years and sanctioned its actions. However, it was only in the wake of the August election, when the UNP vote plummeted to an all-time low and it won only one seat, that the FIB decided to break ties with the NSSP.

The FIB's declaration that the NSSP had abandoned its core principles is completely hypocritical. The FIB has its origins in the opportunist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that emerged in the Fourth International in the wake of World War II. The “core principle” of the Pabloites was the abandonment of any struggle for the political independence of the working class as it sought to dissolve the sections of the Trotskyist movement into the national “mass movements” dominated by the various Stalinist, Social Democratic and bourgeois nationalist parties in each country.

Genuine Trotskyists rallied to the call of American Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon's “Open Letter” issued in 1953. They formed the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to continue the struggle to uphold the fundamental principles of Trotskyism. In 1963, the ICFI opposed the unprincipled reunification of Cannon and the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP) with the Pabloites to form the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec).

The FIB's decision to finally suspend the NSSP has parallels with the USec decision to disaffiliate the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) when it joined the SLFP government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike in

1964. The Pabloites had covered up and abetted the LSSP's political backsliding right up to the point when it became the first nominally Trotskyist party in the world to join a bourgeois government and, in doing so, betray a mass movement of the working class (see: “The Great Betrayal in Sri Lanka”).

Despite its criticisms of the opportunism of Pablo and Mandel in 1953, the LSSP, which was then the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International, refused to support the Open Letter and join the ICFI. For more than a decade, the Pabloites boasted of their mass party in Sri Lanka and sanctioned the LSSP's adaptation to the SLFP and its poisonous Sinhala populism.

The LSSP criticised the SLFP's “Sinhala only” policy—making Sinhala the only national language—in the 1956 election for “dividing the nation.” However, in 1958, it offered “responsive co-operation” with the SLFP-led government and in the July 1960 election entered into a no-contest pact with the SLFP.

The Pabloites sanctioned all these moves and paved the way for the LSSP's entry into an SLFP government. In a letter to the LSSP in 1960, they advised: “We accept that it is possible for a revolutionary party to give critical support to a non-working class government (whether middle class or capitalist) in a colonial or semi-colonial country.”

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, was established in 1968 in opposition to the LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government in 1964. It was based on the understanding that this betrayal was not simply the responsibility of LSSP leaders in Colombo but was a product of the Pabloite opportunism of the USec leadership.

The NSSP, however, never rejected the LSSP's class collaborationist politics. The NSSP's leaders, including Karunaratne, began their political careers in the 1960s as LSSP members. They remained inside the LSSP after it entered the short-lived Bandaranaike government and the second SLFP-coalition government, which came to power in 1970 and also included the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka.

The second Bandaranaike government was responsible for crushing the 1971 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising, in which thousands of rural youth were slaughtered, imposing emergency rule and intensifying anti-Tamil communalism. LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva was the minister responsible for drawing up the communal constitution that was enacted in 1972 to enshrine priority for the Sinhala language and Buddhism, the main religion of the Sinhalese majority.

In 1975, when Bandaranaike booted the LSSP out of the coalition government, the LSSP was thoroughly compromised in the eyes of the working class and the rural poor. Yet Karunaratne and the NSSP leaders remained in the LSSP, only leaving to form the new party after the LSSP's crushing defeat in the 1977 election. The NSSP was formed in 1978 and voted to continue the Samasamajist tradition—that is of the politics of coalition and class collaboration.

In 1981, the NSSP joined the Committee for a Workers International (CWI)—a breakaway from the USec—and continued its perfidious role for the next decade with the CWI's blessing.

The UNP—now proclaimed by the NSSP as a defender of democracy—came to power in 1977 and enacted an anti-democratic constitution that established an autocratic, executive presidency. Its leader, J. R. Jayawardene, who became the first executive president, initiated a program of market restructuring that led to privatisations, the slashing of social spending and the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions.

As opposition emerged, the NSSP played a critical role in blocking any political struggle by the working class. In the midst of a general strike by public sector workers in July 1980, the NSSP and its unions opposed the RCL's call for a political fight to bring down the government. The NSSP's stance helped paved the way for Jayawardene to sack 100,000 striking workers.

Facing continuing social unrest, the Jayawardene regime whipped up a climate of anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class along communal lines. This culminated in a 1983 island-wide pogrom and marked the start of the brutal communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Amid continuing social unrest and a crisis on the military front, Jayawardene called a roundtable conference in 1986 to enlist the support of the opposition parties. The NSSP enthusiastically participated in this gathering of the Colombo political establishment designed to shore up faltering bourgeois rule.

In July 1987, Jayawardene signed the Indo-Lanka Accord with the then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Under the Accord, the Tamil elite were granted limited powers in the north and east and Indian "peacekeeping" soldiers were sent in to disarm the LTTE and suppress unrest among Tamils. All of this was hailed by the NSSP as progressive.

In reality, Jayawardene signed the Accord so that he had a free hand to use the army and police against rising discontent among Sinhala rural youth in the south of the island. After toying with the idea of an alliance with the Sinhala chauvinist JVP, the UNP government turned on the JVP which was whipping up opposition to the Accord on the reactionary communal basis that it was dividing the nation.

In the midst of murderous attacks on workers, trade unionists and political opponents by the JVP, the RCL called for the formation of a united front of working-class parties to take concrete measures to defend the working class and its organisations. The NSSP rejected the call and sided with the UNP government as it unleashed military-linked death squads that slaughtered some 60,000 rural youth between 1988 and 1990.

The NSSP's open support for the Accord and the UNP repression was criticised by a minority faction led by Sirithunga Jayasuriya, which adapted to the JVP's chauvinist campaign. The CWI backed the dissident faction and in 1989, the NSSP broke from it. In 1991, the NSSP joined the Pabloite USec, which proceeded to sanction the organisation's political treachery over the next three decades. The Jayasuriya group went on to establish the United Socialist Party (USP) as the CWI's section in Sri Lanka.

The early 1990s was marked by mounting opposition to the repressive rule of the UNP regime. The NSSP, along with other fake left organisations, rallied around the SLFP led by Chandrika Kumaratunga and promoted her false promises to end the war against the LTTE and improve living standards. In doing so, they subordinated the working class to the openly bourgeois SLFP, helped derail the mass unrest and assisted Kumaratunga to win the presidency in 1994.

Kumaratunga broke all her promises, intensifying the war and the pro-market restructuring initiated by the UNP. As opposition to the government grew, the NSSP struck an alliance with the JVP which was ditching its guerrilla methods and attempting to find a place in the

Colombo political establishment. The NSSP provided its political assistance despite the fact that the JVP had murdered a number of NSSP members in its fascistic attacks in the late 1980s (see: "Sri Lanka's New Left Front: an anti-working class bloc").

At the same time, the NSSP began cultivating close relations with the UNP with the approval of the Pabloites. In 2002, the NSSP supported US-backed peace talks and a cease-fire agreement between the UNP government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the LTTE. The talks were scuttled by President Kumaratunga who lined up with the JVP and the military in condemning the negotiations as a betrayal of the nation.

In early 2009, the UNP formed the so-called Platform for Freedom with the NSSP and the breakaway United Socialist Party (USP), the new CWI affiliate in Sri Lanka. The NSSP and the USP hailed Wickremesinghe and the UNP as champions of democracy against the authoritarian methods of the SLFP government by then President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The FIB's *International Viewpoint* published an article written by Karunaratne on August 25, 2011 that explained his backing for the UNP. He declared that the NSSP was giving "critical support" to the UNP and its leaders and had requested them to transform the party into a "social democratic party—a radically reformist bourgeois party" (see: "Sri Lankan NSSP repudiates socialism and the October Revolution").

The 2011 eruption of revolutionary struggles of the Egyptian working class against that country's US-backed military regime occasioned a dramatic shift to the right by the Pabloites and other political imposters that the ICFI characterised as the pseudo-left.

The New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA) in France and the NSSP, on the bogus pretext of defending "human rights," supported the military interventions led by US imperialism into Libya and Syria. In Greece, the Syriza government, supported by the pseudo-left internationally, tore up its election promises and was the instrument for imposing the brutal austerity measures demanded by finance capital on the working class.

In Sri Lanka, the NSSP supported the UNP and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) in their US-backed campaign against the Rajapakse government. The US had supported President Mahinda Rajapakse's brutal war against the LTTE that ended in May 2009 and turned a blind eye to the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians, as well as the use of torture and extra-judicial killings. But as the war ended, Washington became increasingly concerned about Rajapakse's close ties with Beijing and sought to exploit the "human rights" issue.

When pressure failed to force Rajapakse to change course, the Obama administration orchestrated a regime change in the 2015 presidential election, replacing him with Maithripala Sirisena as president and Wickremesinghe as prime minister. The NSSP, along with other pseudo-left groups, the trade unions and academics were instrumental in this imperialist operation and in dressing up the right-wing UNP and Sirisena, who had been one of Rajapakse's top ministers, in a progressive garb. They claimed Sirisena's election would assure "good governance" and the NSSP proclaimed his win as a "democratic revolution."

In recognition of his services to imperialism and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie, NSSP leader Karunaratne—along with JVP and TNA leaders—was appointed to the so-called "executive council," headed by Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. The purpose of the executive council, which lasted four months, was to stabilise the new regime as it rapidly re-oriented foreign policy towards Washington.

The NSSP continued to act as a de-facto partner of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe's "unity government" until it was torn apart by growing social opposition to its austerity policies and anti-democratic methods. Despite the break-up, Karunaratne remained a staunch supporter of Wickremesinghe.

None of this occasioned any political criticism or warnings from the Pabloite FIB. Indeed, as recently as April 2019, *International Viewpoint*

published an NSSP statement following the Easter terrorist bombings in Sri Lanka that covered up the fact that Wickremesinghe and other political leaders had been warned of the attack by state intelligence agencies but did nothing to prevent it. The government exploited the bombings to whip up anti-Muslim hysteria and justify the deployment of the army amid a rising tide of class struggles.

Wickremesinghe, the NSSP declared, must “rise to the occasion to consolidate power and save democracy.” In fact, the UNP and Wickremesinghe were rapidly losing support and credibility. The continued backing of the NSSP, the JVP and the TNA for the UNP as the “democratic alternative” to Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who had been defence secretary during the final brutal months of the war against the LTTE, helped tie workers to one or other of the two discredited, crisis-ridden bourgeois parties. For his loyal service to the UNP, which split prior to the 2020 general election in August, Karunaratne was given a place on that party’s election ticket.

For all their prattle about defending “core principles,” the Pabloites are preparing new betrayals of the working class in Sri Lanka. The FIB has turned to an NSSP splinter group—Vame Handa or Left Voice—to become their new Sri Lanka section. *International Viewpoint* published a statement by Left Voice on July 17 entitled: “An invitation to carry forward the Nava Sama Samaja Traditions”—in other words, to continue the same treacherous politics of class collaboration that characterised the NSSP. In fact, those that signed the call were NSSP leaders until recently and thus implicated in all its sordid maneuvers with the UNP.

None of the immense problems confronting the working class—the drive to war, austerity, autocratic forms of rule, all of which have been accelerated by the global COVID-19 pandemic—can be resolved within the framework of the capitalist system. Mass struggles are on the agenda, but to be successful workers and youth require a genuine revolutionary leadership. The ICFI has waged a protracted political fight against all forms of opportunism, which is the essential political preparation to overthrow capitalism and build socialism internationally.

We urge workers and youth to join the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, and build it as the mass revolutionary party for the struggles ahead.



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