

Sri Lanka marks 13 years of Mullivaikal massacre amid mass anti-Rajapakse protests

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Today, on May 18, millions of people worldwide are commemorating the 13th anniversary of the massacre at Mullivaikal that ended Sri Lanka's horrific, 26-year communal civil war.

On May 18, 2009, the Sri Lankan army finally surrounded 400,000 Tamil civilians and surviving Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters in a 6km radius around Mullivaikal. The Sri Lankan government had initially declared the area a "no fire zone" and told civilians to go there to be safe. However, the army then launched a mass artillery barrage on the men, women and children trapped at Mullivaikal.

More than 40,000 people were killed, and 300,000 were locked up in infamous detention camps. In these camps, more than 12,000 men and women were arrested by Sri Lanka's anti-terrorism unit and detained in separate, secret camps. The details of how they met their fate remain unknown to this day. This horrific act of mass murder was carried out under the direct orders of then-Defense Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who is now the president of Sri Lanka.

Today, masses of workers and youth—Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim alike—have risen up against Rajapakse, as he starves the people with unbearable prices for food and fuel. They are demanding: "Gotabhaya has got to go." Amid the onrush of mass strikes and protests, Gotabhaya Rajapakse has been forced to dismiss his prime minister and brother, Mahinda Rajapakse—the latter was president during the Mullivaikal massacre.

To quell the anger of the masses, the Rajapakse clan has signaled its plans to rely fully on its experience in mass killing. A month ago, Mahinda Rajapakse demanded that workers end the protest movement, warning, "I urge you to understand its danger from a historical perspective." Now, after strikes forced the ouster of Mahinda as prime minister, Gotabhaya Rajapakse has imposed a state of emergency and authorised the army to shoot anyone they declare to be a rioter.

The emergence of a mass movement for the overthrow of Rajapakse invests the Mullivaikal massacre with urgent contemporary significance. The question posed by the commemoration to working people in Sri Lanka—Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims—and around the world is: how can a new outbreak of such horrific bloodshed be prevented?

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Sri Lanka has called for the unification of the working class and its mobilisation to bring down the executive presidency. The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie has always relied on a strategy of dividing Sinhalese from Tamil to avert the threat from below—even if this meant plunging workers into fratricidal mass murder. Against the corporatist trade unions linked to the Rajapakse regime—which is mobilizing thugs to attack protesters—the SEP has called for the formation of independent action committees to obtain basic necessities and organize the defense against repression.

The working class has already defeated one attempt by Rajapakse to mobilize his thugs to clear protesters off the streets of Colombo. The deaths at Mullivaikal of masses of Tamil workers and youth, both civilians and LTTE fighters, stand however as an unforgettable warning to the entire working class of the ruthlessness of Rajapakse and the entire ruling class.

They also stand as an unanswerable indictment of the surviving Tamil nationalist groups, who are now jumping into Rajapakse's bloodstained arms. Shocked by the first united struggle of Jaffna University students last month since the end of British rule, the authorities responded by closing the university. Tamil National Alliance (TNA) leader M. A. Sumanthiran boasted of speaking to Mahinda Rajapakse, and advising how to change the government to end the protests.

Many officials of the TNA and its political satellites will no doubt speak and shed crocodile tears on the anniversary of the tragedy. Over the last decade, their speeches at these commemorations have taken on the character of a predictable ritual. They call on Tamils to seek justice from the US and Indian governments—whose ambassadors in fact gave Rajapakse the green light to carry out the Mullivaikal massacre. They make hostile comments against the Sinhalese people, falsely implying that Sinhalese workers are racist and hostile to Tamils.

The Tamil nationalists are also helping build a Sri Lankan branch of India's ruling Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party and a related communal organization, the Shiv Sena, and assisting the Indian bourgeoisie's economic deals with Rajapakse. From such deals, a considerable layer in and around

the Tamil nationalist parties profit personally, operating businesses that exploit workers at rock-bottom wages. Their racialist rhetoric works to divide the workers and protect their profits and privileges from the anger welling up from below.

The surge in global prices of grain and fuel that is starving Sri Lankan workers is rooted in the bankruptcy of capitalism and can only be opposed based on a struggle for socialism. The mass printing of money by central banks to enrich the investing classes during the COVID-19 pandemic has devalued currencies around the world. Together with the cutoff of energy and grain exports, as a result of the NATO powers' war drive against Russia, this is making essential fuel and foodstuffs unaffordable for masses of workers in Sri Lanka.

The renewed insurrectionary struggle of the Sri Lankan workers puts the struggle for socialism, for the expropriation of the super-rich and against imperialist war, on the order of the day.

In the decade before the communal war in Sri Lanka broke out in 1983, the Tamil bourgeois nationalists promised to build socialism, but claimed they had to first construct a separate Tamil state in which to achieve it. Echoing their Indian Stalinist allies and, ultimately, the Soviet bureaucracy itself, they duped the workers with the mirage of building a variant of Stalin's "socialism in one country."

The ending of the civil war in the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent people at Mullivaikal, like the Tamil nationalist groups' alliance with the Rajapakse in the face of mass strikes and protests in Sri Lanka, testify to the bankruptcy of this perspective.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) seeks to unify the working class in struggle based on the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) irreconcilable opposition to nationalism and Stalinism. The ICFI opposed the tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that broke with Trotskyism in 1953, advocating the dissolution of the Fourth International into Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist parties. The seeds of Sri Lanka's communal war were sown in the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's (LSSP) capitulation to Pabloism and its Great Betrayal of the workers.

The Sri Lankan Trotskyists in the LSSP had courageously opposed British colonial rule over the Indian subcontinent. They fought to build the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI) to lead a socialist revolution across India and internationally. The BLPI joined the Fourth International. After strikes and revolts across India, including in the British army, toppled the British Raj in 1947, the BLPI denounced the sham independence London had accorded to capitalist states carved out of the Indian subcontinent in order to abort a socialist revolution.

The Trotskyist movement had broad support among workers of all national and religious backgrounds in Sri Lanka. It opposed the post-war nation-state system created by imperialism and supported by the Stalinists. In Sri Lanka, the

BLPI and the LSSP opposed the communal decision of the newly-established United National Party government to deprive one million Tamil plantation workers of citizenship.

After the Pabloites had succeeded in dissolving the BLPI, in 1964, the LSSP, to which the BLPI had been liquidated, entered the capitalist government of Madam Sirimavo Bandaranaike and acquiesced to a constitution enshrining Sinhalese Buddhism as a state religion. This betrayal, and the anger it caused among Tamil workers, created conditions for the Tamil bourgeois nationalists to win a broader following than ever before.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the predecessor of the SEP, emerged as the Marxist internationalist opposition to the LSSP's Great Betrayal. Founded in 1968, the RCL rejected the LSSP's policy as a betrayal of the working class, a capitulation to national chauvinism, and the product of the LSSP's capitulation to Pabloism. The emergence of Sri Lankan workers in a common struggle against the executive presidency, a decade after the Mullivaikal massacre, is a powerful vindication of the SEP's historical and political perspective.

The war crimes committed in Sri Lanka's communal war must be investigated and punished, and the lasting social wounds of the war must be treated. More than 100,000 war widows and their children struggle to make ends meet. Elderly parents whose children died in the war live in dire conditions without food and medical facilities and need assistance and protection. Many others have lost limbs, are traumatized, or remain charged and imprisoned on suspicion of being LTTE cadres.

Over the decade that has passed since the Mullivaikal massacre, it has become ever clearer that the crimes of the war will not be punished by the Sri Lankan ruling class which carried them out, or by its imperialist allies in the United States and Europe. Punishing the crimes and addressing the devastating impact of the war are tasks that fall to the emerging revolutionary movement in the working class, fighting to build the United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Tamil Eelam as part of the United Socialist States of Asia.



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