

75 years since independence: Sri Lankan ruling elite celebrates its brutal record

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The Sri Lankan government, amid the rising anger of millions of workers and the poor over the escalating attacks on their social and democratic rights, is celebrating the 75th anniversary of the country's formal independence from British colonial rule on February 4, 1948.

On the day of the official celebration, Colombo resembled a garrison city. Thousands of soldiers, armed with assault rifles, were deployed along roads, and police with water-cannon fitted vehicles were placed at points considered to be critical. Galle Face Green in central Colombo, the official celebration venue, was sealed off a kilometre away, preventing civilians entering the area.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe received a guard of honour from the military and police at Galle Face Green. Seated behind him were foreign diplomats, ministers and MPs from the ruling party, and some state bureaucrats. No ordinary Sri Lankan citizens were allowed into the official event. The only civilians attending were some two dozen reporters and a group of school children organised to sing the national anthem.

The night before, riot police armed with tear gas and water cannons brutally attacked dozens of people holding a sit-down protest at Maradana in Colombo. On Independence Day, police stopped a political event critical of "independence" organised by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP)-controlled Inter-University Student Federation.

The official Independence Day proceedings were a graphic exposure of the repressive regime entrenched by the Wickremesinghe government which fears a mass upsurge by working people against its brutal policies.

In April–July last year, the country was convulsed by anti-government protests and strikes involving millions of workers and the rural poor, a sharp expression of rising struggles by the international working class. The demonstrators demanded not just the resignation of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government but also chanted, "Down with the 225"—that is, the resignation of all members of parliament—and an end to the "74-year curse" of capitalist rule since independence.

This mass movement was betrayed by the trade unions, backed by pseudo-left groups like the FSP, which diverted popular anger into support for the demand by the bourgeois opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—for an interim government.

This betrayal paved way for the anti-democratic installation of the unpopular Wickremesinghe, the sole parliamentarian of the United National Party (UNP), as Sri Lankan president after President Gotabhaya Rajapakse fled the country and resigned in July.

The Sri Lankan capitalist class faces an unprecedented economic

disaster. Like countries around the world, this crisis was deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic and then the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Supply chain disruptions and economic sanctions on Russia drastically reduced exports while higher prices for oil and other imports fuelled inflation, emptying the country's already meagre foreign reserves.

Wickremesinghe, following Rajapakse, turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout loan. This is conditional on deep-going austerity measures, including the destruction of tens of thousands of public sector jobs, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, income tax increases and cuts in price subsidies.

IMF policies have further driven up the cost of essentials, including food, medicine, fuel, cooking gas and electricity, pushing inflation to almost 60 percent.

According to a recent World Bank report, Sri Lanka's poverty rate has increased to almost 26 percent. A UNICEF report show 5.7 million people, including 2.3 million children, urgently require humanitarian assistance. Sri Lanka now has one of the highest proportions of malnourished children in the world. Three in ten households, or 6.26 million people, are food insecure.

Starting last December, a new wave of protests and strikes have erupted against the Wickremesinghe government's austerity measures, including by postal, port, petroleum, bank, health, telecom and plantation workers.

Sri Lankan independence was declared just three years after the end of Second World War. The British colonial rulers' decision to grant independence to India in 1947 and Sri Lanka in 1948 was part of the post-WWII imperialist settlement in the region.

The Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the Indian section of the Fourth International at that time, provided a farsighted Marxist analysis of the real class character of this "independence." In a powerful statement on Sri Lanka, entitled "Independence: Real or Fake," BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva wrote:

"There is nothing for the people to 'rejoice' about in the 'independence' they proclaim ... For the new status they are obtaining is not only not independence but also actually a *refashioning of the chains of Ceylon's slavery to British Imperialism*... The task of holding down the oppressed and insurgent masses is left in the first instance to Ceylon's own bourgeoisie."

Rejecting this fake independence, the Trotskyists boycotted the official celebrations in 1948 and instead organised a mass rally attended by 50,000 workers at Galle Face Green.

The first act of Prime Minister D.S. *Senanayake's* UNP government in 1948 was to abolish the citizenship rights of more than a million Tamil plantation workers of Indian origin. This reactionary political

move to divide the working class on ethnic lines was opposed by the BLPI.

Notwithstanding the BLPI's later political adaptation to the post-WWII arrangements and its 1950 merger with the opportunist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), its analysis of and principled response to the independence of Sri Lanka has been powerfully confirmed.

In the next decades, the LSSP adapted to Sinhala populism and capitalist rule. This down-sliding ultimately led to the LSSP's Great Betrayal when it abandoned socialist internationalism and in 1964 joined a coalition government with the capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party led by Sirima Bandaranaike. The LSSP's betrayal was aided and abetted by the Pabloite revisionist current, an opportunist faction led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel that had emerged in the Fourth International following World War II and broke from Trotskyism in 1953.

The LSSP scuttled a mass movement of the working class on entering the Bandaranaike government and embraced the supremacist Sinhala ideology of the capitalist elite. In 1972, the SLFP-LSSP coalition government, with the support of the Stalinist Communist Party, imposed a new constitution, enshrining Buddhism as the primary religion of the country and Sinhala as the official language.

The LSSP betrayal created immense confusion among the masses that was exploited by the JVP, which, basing itself on a mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala patriotism, emerged during these years. In the North, the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and other armed groups emerged.

The repressive coalition government paved the way for the right-wing UNP to come to power with a large parliamentary majority. Its leader, J.R. Jayawardene, used this to impose an autocratic executive presidential constitution and introduce open market measures, slash welfare programs, and begin the privatisation of numerous state institutions. In 1980, public sector workers began a general strike to oppose these attacks but were crushed by the government, which, exploiting the betrayal of the trade unions, sacked around 100,000 employees.

In 1983, after a systematic anti-Tamil campaign, the Jayawardene government provoked war against the LTTE, which, in turn, was used to divide and weaken the working class.

Every Sri Lankan government that came to power during the bloody 26-year war that ended in May 2009, used the conflict to suppress working class struggles. Over 100,000 Tamils were killed during the war, which injured and maimed thousands more, and devastated the North and East. The huge foreign loans obtained by Colombo to launch and maintain the war are another major factor in the current economic crisis.

Every single Colombo government during this conflict worked closely with the imperialist powers, including the US, as well as India. Like all Tamil bourgeois parties, the LTTE also appealed to the "international community, that is the imperialist powers, to support its separatist cause. All of Sri Lanka's capitalist parties, including the JVP, backed this war.

Sajith Premadasa, leader of the SJB, an offshoot of the UNP, did not participate in the official Independence Day celebration. It was a desperate attempt to politically distance himself from Wickremesinghe and his government. He issued a crude nationalistic tweet, however, calling on everyone to stand together, "in a testament to our unwavering commitment to creating a brighter future for all Sri Lankans."

The JVP did not issue a separate statement on Independence Day or criticise the police mobilisation but condemned Wickremesinghe for spending too much money on the event.

The SJB and the JVP have no fundamental differences with the Wickremesinghe government and its IMF program. Both are concerned about the rising mass anti-government opposition but have indicated they would implement the same IMF austerity measures if they come to power.

The pseudo-left FSP, which has declared that there is no independence to celebrate, is campaigning for People's Councils (Jana Sabha) across the country. This, it claims, will pressure whichever government is in power to serve the masses. This is a crude manoeuvre to keep the population trapped in the parliamentary framework and block the development of an independent movement of the working class against capitalism.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only party willing and able to provide leadership to the working class on the basis of an international socialist program. Its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), was established in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of International Committee of the Fourth International. It was formed in opposition to the LSSP's betrayal and an understanding of its origins in Pabloite opportunism.

Based on Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, the RCL consistently fought to defend the political independence of the working class from every faction of the capitalist class. As the Theory of Permanent Revolution explains, the bourgeoisie in countries of belated capitalist development is incapable of resolving the democratic and socialist aspirations of workers and the poor. This is what has been proven time and time again in Sri Lanka.

In order to combat the government attacks and fight for their social and democratic rights, the SEP urges workers to build their own action committees in workplaces, neighbourhoods and rural areas, independent of the capitalist parties and trade unions.

There is no solution for the burning problems of masses within the capitalist system. Workers must take control of the production and distribution of the essentials of life. This can only be done by repudiating all foreign debts and nationalising the banks, large companies and plantations, placing them under workers' democratic control.

To fight for this program, the SEP is campaigning to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on elected representatives from these action committees. It is crucial to build such a power centre of the working class, supported by the rural poor, to fight for a workers' and peasants' government, as part of the struggle for socialism in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally.

The SEP urges workers and youth to study our perspective and program, and join it to fight for a socialist future.



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