

Sri Lankan pseudo-left FSP promotes “people’s councils” and class collaboration

Deepal Jayasekera
17 April 2023

The Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), a pseudo-left organisation in Sri Lanka, is advocating the formation of “people’s councils” and “a people’s government” as a false solution to the burning political issues and social crisis confronting workers, youth and the rural masses. The FSP has advocated “people’s councils” since last July when a popular uprising of workers, youths and rural poor ousted the then government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse. Now it has highlighted these proposals in a booklet titled “New Path,” issued as its program for the local government elections.

The FSP is a breakaway from the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which was notorious for its enthusiastic support for racist war carried out by successive Colombo governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As the JVP became increasingly discredited among workers and particularly youth, due to its support for the communal war and its participation in, and backing of, bourgeois governments, the FSP leaders broke from the JVP in 2011 and formed the new party in 2012.

The JVP emerged as a petty-bourgeois organisation based among rural Sinhala youth in the south of Sri Lanka in late 1960s, advocating the “armed struggle” based on an eclectic ideological mixture of Stalinism-Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala populism. Its adventurist armed rebellion in 1971 was brutally crushed, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 20,000 youth. In 1988–89, it bitterly denounced the Indo-Lanka Accord on the chauvinist basis that it brought Indian troops into northern Sri Lanka and divided the island. Its gunmen carried out murderous attacks on workers and working-class parties that opposed and refused to support its Sinhala patriotic campaign. It opened the door for another brutal state crackdown on rural youth with a horrific death toll of 60,000.

The FSP does not renounce this history. It now criticises the JVP for having joined the Colombo political establishment, even though its leaders did not criticise the party’s decision to become ministers in a bourgeois coalition government with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 2004. They broke organisationally from the JVP in 2011 but not ideologically, as their subsequent political evolution and the FSP’s current “New Path” demonstrates.

The FSP pamphlet declares: “We propose a new form of state structure based on a peoples-participation democratic principle in which state power is directed by people’s councils.” Explaining the role of these “people’s councils,” the FSP proposes the “creation of people’s power outside of existing representative bodies, which can pressurise them as the first step of building a people’s state.”

The constant use of the term “people” is a deliberate rejection of any class characterisation of society. Capitalist society is divided into classes—the two main classes being those who own the means of production, the capitalist class, and those compelled to sell their labour power to gain their daily bread, the working class. The amorphous intermediate or middle classes, which in Sri Lanka includes a large peasantry, are compelled to follow one or another of the bourgeoisie or the

proletariat.

The FSP refers to “the people,” not workers, in order to obscure its adaptation to sections of the capitalist class and their political parties. “People’s councils” and “a people’s government” would therefore welcome the support of so-called “progressive” elements of big business, and of bourgeois opposition parties such as the JVP and the right-wing Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB).

The FSP proposes “to build a people’s movement” to win a “series of short-term reforms amid the economic and political crisis,” while adding as an afterthought that “the final solution for this crisis is building socialism.” This is nothing but a rehash of the Stalinist two-stage theory that advocates alliances with the “progressive bourgeoisie” for short-term reforms, while consigning the fight for socialism to the indefinite future—a future that never arrives.

The Trotskyist movement, represented in Sri Lanka by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), has always condemned this reactionary class collaboration, which in the course of the last century has led to one disaster after another for the working class, internationally and in Sri Lanka. The betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in entering the bourgeois Bandaranaike government in 1964 derailed the mass “21 demands” movement of the working class, encouraged the growth of racist petty-bourgeois tendencies such as the JVP, and ultimately led to communal war.

Now the FSP is proposing to repeat that political debacle in the midst of a far deeper crisis of capitalist rule in Sri Lanka. And the consequences for the working class of the FSP’s class collaborationist proposals for “a people’s movement,” and “a people’s government” will be even more disastrous.

Leon Trotsky established in his Theory of Permanent Revolution that no section of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development like Sri Lanka can meet the democratic aspirations and social needs of the masses. Only the working class, by rousing rural toilers in a political struggle for power, can meet those needs and begin the socialist reconstruction of society as part of the fight for socialism internationally.

The FSP’s proposals for “people’s councils” and “people’s movement,” which is nothing more than going with a begging bowl to the government and parliament, are leading working people into a dangerous political dead-end. Both the government and bourgeois opposition parties, including the JVP and SJB, agree with the need to implement the IMF’s austerity measures and impose intolerable burdens on the masses in order to save Sri Lankan capitalism.

What have been the political lessons of the last year? Amid the popular uprising against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, the FSP appealed to the JVP, SJB, other opposition parties and the trade unions for a broad front. But those were the very organisations that did everything in their power to limit the mass movement and steer it into the political blind alley of parliament where Ranil Wickremesinghe was anti-democratically installed in power. The FSP, along with the opposition

parties and the trade unions, bears political responsibility for the Wickremesinghe government coming to office.

Now the FSP is seeking to subordinate working people once again to the opposition parties, which in power would implement the IMF agenda just as ruthlessly and attack protesters and strikers just as violently. The entire Colombo establishment argues that there is no alternative to end the current economic crisis. Within the framework of capitalism that is indeed true. But that is why the working class can only defend its class interests by fighting for socialist politics and a workers' and peasants' government to implement them.

In opposition to the FSP, the SEP bases itself squarely on the working class. In opposition to the FSP's appeals to the capitalist opposition parties to join people's councils, the SEP calls on workers to form action committees in every workplace and suburb independent of all bourgeois parties and their trade unions. We call on rural toilers to form their own independent action committees to link up with the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The task of these action committees is not to pressure the government for cosmetic measures that will do nothing to end the suffering of working people. We advance a series of demands to meet the pressing social needs of workers and the rural masses.

- * Reject the IMF austerity agenda! No to wage cuts! No to pension cuts!

- * Decent wages for all workers indexed to the cost of living! Improve the pension to a decent level to meet high inflation!

- * No to starvation and malnutrition! Secure a nutritious diet for all!

- * Repudiate all foreign debts! Seize the assets of the super-rich and nationalise the major banks and corporations under workers' control!

The SEP emphatically rejects all forms of class collaborationism. The FSP's call for a "people's government" is a call for a coalition with bourgeois parties—that is a bourgeois government. The SEP's demands lead inexorably to the fight for political power by the working class, leading the rural masses, and the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

The opposition parties, backed by the FSP, are calling for a new capitalist government—a people's government—that will impose the IMF's socially reactionary measures. The SEP is calling for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses (DSC) based on democratically elected delegates from workers' and rural toilers' action committees throughout the country.

The party statement issued on July 20 last year explained: "The SEP's call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses provides a political strategy for the working class to consolidate its forces, win the active support of the rural masses, and lay the basis for its own rule through a workers' and peasants' government committed to restructuring society on socialist lines." This needs to be part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

Insofar as the FSP even speaks about "socialism" as the "real alternative to the crisis," it is nothing but a reformist program completely within the framework of the profit system. It calls for "a fair economy," which "means minimising the inequality." It argues: "To increase production, producer, the labourer who toils for that production must have a fair share. Therefore, increasing production is bound up with an economy in which the distribution of benefits will be completely on a fair basis. We say socialism is the only alternative because none of these problems will be solved by cosmetic changes to capitalism."

Whatever its claims, the FSP is proposing nothing more than cosmetic changes to capitalism. The FSP demands for a "fair share" for the working class keeping capitalist private property and profit making intact. Its demand for a "fair share" also depends on increasing production—that is, boosting the profits of corporations. The FSP advises the capitalist class that in order to boost profits it must give a "fair share" to workers.

Socialism is not "the distribution of benefits on a fair basis" between

capitalist owners and workers but the overthrow of capitalism in which surplus value is extracted from workers through exploitation of their labour power, and the establishment of workers' democratic control over the means of production. The phony "socialism" proposed by the FSP is nothing more than another version of the old trade union credo "a fair day's pay, for a fair day's work" that poses no challenge to the profit system at all.

Moreover, the FSP advances its demands under conditions of a historic economic breakdown of capitalism, not just in Sri Lanka, but globally. Not only are the ruling classes not offering "a fair share" but are determined to make working people accept huge new burdens in order to prop up their bankrupt social order. In every country, workers are being told to accept real wage cuts, harsher working conditions and the slashing of essential social services, such as public education, health care and pensions.

The FSP attributes the economic crisis confronting Sri Lankan bourgeois rule to "incorrect economic policies"—i.e., "neo-liberal economic policies," including the immense foreign loans taken out by successive governments since 1977—and demands a "change of neo-liberal policies from their foundation."

Neo-liberal policies, however, were completely bound up with fundamental changes in the world economy and the globalisation of production, which undermined all forms of national economic regulation. It was not just governments in Sri Lanka but every country in the world opened its doors to global capital, offering "its" workers as cheap labour to global corporations and privatising essential services. It is a utopian fantasy to suggest a return to the days of a nationally regulated capitalist economy.

The turn to the globalisation of production took place in response to the last great crisis of global capitalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Far from resolving the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, it has heightened them and led to a far deeper economic crisis for which the ruling classes have no resolution other than war against their rivals and class war against the working class.

Contrary to FSP's arguments, the root cause of the economic crisis confronting Sri Lanka is the crisis of global capitalism greatly intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine and particularly US and European sanctions against Russia have severely disrupted global supply chains, leading to global shortages of, and skyrocketing prices for, essentials like food, fuel and medicine, which have hit Sri Lanka particularly hard.

The FSP calls for "an economy free from imperialist trap" and cites an appeal by 134 economists and academics to abolish Sri Lanka's foreign debt. It accuses the Wickremesinghe government of failing to join this group in "developing a world opinion for abolition of debts." What a farce! First the FSP proposes to pressure bourgeois parties in Sri Lanka for cosmetic reforms. Then it proposes to pressure the imperialist powers and the banks and global financial institutions to cancel Sri Lanka's foreign debts.

This will never happen. The SEP insists that all foreign debts were incurred to meet the needs of the capitalist class and its governments, not the working class, and must be completely repudiated.

The FSP's impotent appeal to the global powers simply underscores the fact that none of the pressing issues facing working people in Sri Lanka or anywhere else in the world can be resolved on a national basis. The political struggle against intolerable social conditions, like that against war, climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic, requires the mobilisation of the working class internationally, along with the oppressed masses, against imperialism and the economic domination of global finance capital.

The rotten capitalist system cannot be reformed. It must be overthrown by the working class and society refashioned to meet social needs, as

advocated by the SEP. We call on workers and youth to join us in the building of the necessary revolutionary leadership to carry out that historic task, as part of the political fight waged around the world by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections.



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