

# The “Great Betrayal” in Ceylon, the formation of the American Committee for the Fourth International, and the founding of the Workers League

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## Introduction

In January 1961, the British Trotskyists initiated the struggle against the US Socialist Workers Party’s increasingly explicit adoption of Pabloite positions and organizational overtures to the Pabloite International Secretariat.

Key among the points they made in a letter to the SWP’s leadership were:

First, that “Any retreat from the strategy of political independence of the working class and the construction of revolutionary parties will take on the significance of a world-historical blunder on the part of the Trotskyist movement.”

And second, and very much flowing from the first, “It is time to draw to a close the period in which Pabloite revisionism was regarded as a trend within Trotskyism.”<sup>[1]</sup>

In the two-and-a-half years between its January 2, 1961 letter to the US Socialist Workers Party National Committee and the June 1963 Pabloite reunification congress, the Socialist Labour League (SLL) amplified and theoretically elaborated these warnings: The SWP’s unprincipled reunification with the Pabloites would, it asserted, result in political disasters for the working class.

This assessment was to be vindicated, tragically, just 12 months later, in the form of the Great Betrayal in Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka. On June 9, 1964, amidst a massive crisis on the island pregnant with revolutionary possibilities, the Pabloite Lanka Sama Samaja Party, or

LSSP, entered into Madame Sirimavo Bandaranaike’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party government. This was the first time that a party claiming to be Trotskyist and historically associated with the Fourth International had entered into a bourgeois government.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) immediately recognized the world-historic significance of this betrayal. Gerry Healy traveled to Colombo and sought to intervene in the June 1964 LSSP Congress that decided for coalition.

In a July 5, 1964 statement, the ICFI drew the following seminal conclusion as to the counterrevolutionary role of Pabloism and the urgency of placing the struggle against its liquidationist politics at the center of the fight to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership through the building of revolutionary working class parties—that is, sections of the ICFI.

“The entry of the LSSP members into the Bandaranaike coalition,” it declared, “marks the end of a whole epoch of the evolution of the Fourth International. It is in direct service to imperialism, in the preparation of a defeat for the working class that revisionism in the world Trotskyist movement has found its expression.”<sup>[2]</sup>

The lessons of the struggle against reunification and its vindication in the negative in Ceylon were necessarily at the heart of the further development of the ICFI and led directly to the founding of new IC sections in the US and Sri Lanka, respectively, the Workers League and the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL).

The roots of the Workers League can be traced back to the minority in the SWP led by Tim Wohlforth that, beginning in 1961, collaborated with the ICFI and worked under its discipline in opposing reunification with the Pabloites. But the events in Sri Lanka and their lessons were, as we shall show, pivotal in the political clarification and crystallization of the pro-ICFI minority and the founding of the Workers League.

The SWP had opposed Pablo in 1953, only to break with the ICFI and reunite with the Pabloites in 1963, based on a common anti-Trotskyist perspective and the suppression of all discussion of the differences that had led to the split a decade earlier. In Ceylon, by contrast, there had never been an IC section or sympathizing section. In 1953-54, the LSSP had taken an ambivalent stand on the fight against Pablo, ultimately choosing to remain within the Pabloite “Fourth International” and lend its prestige to Pablo and the International Secretariat in exchange for freedom to pursue increasingly explicit national-opportunist politics.

In both the US and Sri Lanka, the SLL’s intervention would prove decisive in rallying and providing a genuine Trotskyist orientation and program to forces repelled by the Pabloites’ betrayal of the permanent revolution and the struggle for the political independence and hegemony

of the working class. In both cases, a period of political clarification and separation from petty-bourgeois forces that claimed to oppose reunification in the case of the SWP and the Great Betrayal in the case of Sri Lanka was necessary before new Trotskyist parties—the Workers League and the RCL—could emerge.

The first part of this lecture will examine the roots of the LSSP's Great Betrayal in Pabloite opportunism, its impact and significance, and the IC's struggle to draw its lessons for the Sri Lankan and world working class.

A second, shorter part, will review the origins of the US Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the emergence, political differentiation and crystallization of a pro-IC minority in the struggle against the SWP's capitulation to Pabloite opportunism.

In this, the Ceylonese events—their roots, import and political lessons—were critical. They were critical, as this lecture will show, to both the formation of the American Committee for the Fourth International in 1964 and the Workers League, which became the Socialist Equality Party in 1995, two years later.

In July 1964, the aforementioned Wohlforth and eight others, including Fred Mazelis, who remains a leader of the US SEP to this day, were expelled from the SWP for calling for an internal party discussion of the events in Ceylon/Sri Lanka and their significance for the world Trotskyist movement. They would form the American Committee for the Fourth International. In November 1966—after a further period of political differentiation from another group that had emerged in the SWP and claimed agreement with the ICFI, the petty-bourgeois nationalists of the Spartacist League—the American Committee for the Fourth International became the Workers League.

Before examining the Pabloite betrayal in Ceylon/Sri Lanka, I want to make one further point. The LSSP played a major role in reunification. In the late 1950s, it served as an instrument for the Pabloites to politically probe the SWP. In the early 1960s, as Hansen and the SWP leaders sought to stampede the membership behind the reunification with the Pabloites, they touted the LSSP as the exemplar of the “mass Trotskyist parties” they were seeking to build in opposition to the “sectarians” and “conservative dogmatists” of the ICFI.

### **Permanent revolution and the principled foundations of Trotskyism in South Asia**

The emergence of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party as a Trotskyist party and the principal party of the Ceylonese working class is a complex question. This history is necessarily discussed at length in the Sri Lankan SEP *Historical and International Foundations* document, which I strongly urge comrades to carefully review.

Here, I can only make some brief but critical observations. At its founding in 1935, the LSSP was a radical nationalist organization opposed to British imperialism's rule over the island with the complicity of the venal national bourgeoisie. It was led by young people, many of them sympathetic to Trotskyism, who had encountered Marxism and revolutionary politics while studying abroad. Chief among these were Colvin de Silva, Philip Gunawardena, Leslie Goonewardene and N.M. Perera.

The rapid descent toward world war in the late 1930s and the Stalinists' counterrevolutionary Popular Frontist politics, which included blatant appeals for the colonial peoples to accommodate themselves to the British and French empires, impelled the LSSP leadership to turn more explicitly to Trotskyism and the Fourth International.

Trotsky's July 1939 “Open Letter to the Workers of India” was written

in response to the efforts of the LSSP leaders sympathetic to the Fourth International (known as the “T” group) to establish direct contact with Trotsky. It would be his last major elaboration of the perspective of Permanent Revolution as regards India, which Trotsky had elsewhere described as the classic colonial country.

Anticipating that the coming Second World War would give a mighty impulse to the democratic revolution in India, Trotsky declared:

The Indian bourgeoisie is incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle. They are closely bound up with and dependent upon British capitalism. They tremble for their own property. They stand in fear of the masses. They seek compromises with British imperialism no matter what the price and lull the Indian masses with hopes of reforms from above. ... Only the proletariat is capable of advancing a bold, revolutionary agrarian programme, of rousing and rallying tens of millions of peasants and leading them in struggle against the native oppressors and British imperialism. The alliance of workers and poor peasants is the only honest, reliable alliance that can assure the final victory of the Indian revolution.<sup>[3]</sup>

Trotsky's “Open Letter” provided a strategic orientation to the best elements within the LSSP. Over the next two-and-a-half years, the LSSP would be politically reformed and refounded—transforming itself from a Ceylonese-based radical nationalist organization into a genuine Trotskyist party fighting to win the working class across South Asia to the program of Permanent Revolution.

The pivotal first step in this process was the expulsion of a pro-Stalinist faction in its ranks in December 1939. The LSSP leaders subsequently elaborated the program of Permanent Revolution in a series of documents. They insisted that the basic tasks of the democratic revolution in the Indian subcontinent, or as it is now more commonly known South Asia, could only be realized through a working class-led socialist revolution, which would rally the rural and urban toilers against imperialism and the national bourgeoisie and orient to the world socialist revolution.

As part of this process of redefining the LSSP's strategic class axis, the Ceylonese Trotskyists came to recognize that there would not, nor could there be, any true settling of accounts with imperialism within the framework of the island of Ceylon. On this basis, they developed the strategic conception of an all-India party and spearheaded, politically and organizationally, the fight to merge various groups proclaiming support for Trotsky and the Fourth International in disparate parts of India into a single party based on adherence to the Fourth International and the program of Permanent Revolution.

As a result of this struggle the LSSP was fundamentally transformed and then subsumed in April 1942 into a new all-India party that immediately sought admission to the Fourth International, the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India, Ceylon and Burma, or BLPI.

The BLPI combined illegal work on the island during the Second World War with an audacious turn to what it recognized was an impending revolutionary explosion in British India. There is truly a heroic element to this story. Time does not allow me to elaborate on it, but having won over a prison guard to Trotskyism, several of the principal Ceylonese Trotskyist leaders escaped in April 1942 from the jail cells to which they had been confined for opposing the war. They then crossed the Palk Strait to India so that they could then lead the BLPI's intervention into the 1942 Quit India movement.

For Gandhi, the Quit India movement was a political gesture aimed at ensuring the bourgeois Indian National Congress' control over rising mass discontent amid the war. But it quickly escaped the control of the

Congress leadership and in much of the country became a national uprising against British rule. While the Stalinists scabbed on the Quit India movement, on the grounds that it jeopardized the war effort of the Soviet Union's British imperialist allies, the BLPI fought for the working class to intervene independently in the struggle against British rule and provide revolutionary leadership to the insurgent rural masses.

The British, albeit not without difficulty, were able to suppress the Quit India movement. However, with the end of the war, India—as much of the world—was convulsed by a revolutionary crisis. This included a mutiny by Royal Indian Navy (RIN) sailors, peasant rebellions and, most importantly, a massive strike wave through which the working class strove to assert its independent class interests.

The emergence of the working class drove the Gandhi-Jawaharlal Nehru-led Indian National Congress to intensify its efforts to reach a settlement with British imperialism.

If the Congress Party was ultimately able to retain political control, it was largely because of the role of the Stalinists, who over the preceding decades had systematically ceded leadership to the national bourgeoisie and subordinated the working class to it on the grounds that it was the rightful leader of the national-democratic revolution. The Communist Party of India endorsed the “transfer of power” agreement between Britain's Labour government, the Congress, and the communalist Muslim League, which partitioned the subcontinent along communal lines into a predominantly Hindu India and an expressly Muslim Pakistan—truly one of the great crimes and tragedies of the 20th century.

In a 1948 speech, BLPI leader Colvin da Silva trenchantly indicted the national bourgeoisie for its “abortion” of the mass anti-imperialist movement. He explained how, through the bloody partition of the subcontinent, communalism had been built into the very state structures of South Asia and new chains forged thereby for the imperialist domination of South Asia.

Colvin da Silva said:

The partition of India, so readily attributable to the Muslim League alone, was fundamentally due not to League politics but to Congress politics. The politics of Congress in relation to British imperialism was not the politics of struggle but the politics of settlement. And the politics of settlement inevitably fed the politics of partition in as much as it also left the initiative with British imperialism.

Pointing to the imminent danger of war between India and Pakistan—and three-quarters of a century on there have been numerous wars between what are today nuclear-armed rivals—da Silva advanced as a strategic imperative the fight for the voluntary socialist reunification of the subcontinent, declaring:

“Whom the bourgeoisie have torn asunder reactionarily, only the working class can unite progressively.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The analysis that the BLPI made of the 1947 settlement has more than stood the test of time. There is a direct line between it and the 1987 ICFI statement, “The situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the Revolutionary Communist League,” which makes a seminal evaluation of the entire post-World War II experience of decolonization and the character of the states to which it gave rise.<sup>[5]</sup>

### **The postwar settlement and the dissolution of the BLPI**

Critical as the BLPI's analysis was, it did not remove the immense pressures bearing down on the Trotskyist movement. While in no way solving the burning problems of the masses, formal independence did open up new possibilities for the national bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie.

Significant divisions had already emerged among the original core of LSSP leaders who had broken with its radical nationalist conceptions, turned to the Fourth International and the perspective of Permanent Revolution and founded the BLPI. In 1943, in the aftermath of the Quit India movement's defeat, Gunawardena and Perera had urged the BLPI to dissolve itself into the Congress Socialist Party, a petty-bourgeois radical organization within the Congress Party, very much akin to what the LSSP had been at its founding in 1935.

Like much of the BLPI leadership, Gunawardena and Perera were captured by the British authorities in India in 1943 and again imprisoned. On their release in 1945, they launched a new organization in Sri Lanka, which they called the LSSP. It claimed to be Trotskyist and to support the Fourth International, but it was politically and organizationally distinct from the BLPI.

Various organizational differences, of an entirely secondary and largely subjective character, were advanced by the LSSP leaders to justify its separate existence. In reality, there were major political differences, rooted in different class orientations. The BLPI recognized this. It condemned the renegacy of the LSSP leaders and warned that their split was the “manifestation of a non-proletarian tendency,” which, if not checked, would develop “into full-blown opportunist politics.”<sup>[6]</sup>

These differences were graphically illustrated in the opposed positions the BLPI and LSSP took on the legislation enshrining the settlement that had been reached between British imperialism and the national bourgeoisie in Ceylon to establish Ceylon as a formally independent state. This was a process from which the masses had been entirely excluded.

BLPI leader Doric de Souza correctly characterized it a “conspiracy against the people.” Da Silva, meanwhile, explained that only the forms of imperialist domination were being altered, with the native bourgeoisie given greater responsibility for administering the state machine that ensured its profits and those of its imperialist patrons. The BLPI voted against the 1947 Ceylon Independence Bill in parliament, boycotted the formal handover ceremony in 1948, and mobilized tens of thousands of workers in Colombo in opposition to the “fake independence.”

By contrast, the LSSP characterized the British handover as a step forward, abstained on the vote on the independence legislation and denounced the BLPI's plans for an opposition rally as “exhibitionism.”

The reactionary character of the “independent” rule of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie was quickly demonstrated. As one of its very first acts, Ceylon's new “independent” government stripped the Tamil plantation workers, the largest section of the working class, of their citizenship rights in a direct continuation of the divide-and-rule politics of the island's former British colonial overlords. The BLPI vehemently condemned this, warning that in defining the nation in racial terms, the Ceylonese ruling class and its state were adopting the language of fascism.

Based on the struggle for the program of Permanent Revolution, the BLPI had established a powerful presence in the working class, especially on the island of Ceylon, where it led major strike movements in 1946 and 1947. But over the next two years, and as part of a growing crisis within the Fourth International, the BLPI would be liquidated.

Organizationally, this took place in two steps. In the fall of 1948, little more than one year after India's independence, the Indian wing of the BLPI voted to dissolve and enter the petty-bourgeois nationalist Congress Socialist Party, which had been renamed the Socialist Party after being excluded from the Gandhi-Nehru Indian National Congress as the latter assumed the reins of power.

The BLPI's liquidation into the Socialist Party in India was soon

followed by the merger of its remaining Sri Lankan section with the LSSP at a “unity congress” held on June 4, 1950. This merger was motivated and publicly justified in crass pragmatic and, frankly, electoralist terms: competition between the two parties in a 1949 by-election had enabled the right-wing UNP government’s candidate to win. “The failure to discuss” the prior political differences, explains the Sri Lankan SEP’s founding document, “demonstrated the real relations in the new party: the right wing headed by N. M. Perera was in charge, while the former BLPI leaders provided him with ‘Trotskyist’ credentials.”<sup>[7]</sup>

In 1948, the Fourth International’s international leadership had urged the BLPI not to proceed with its entry into the Socialist Party of India without further discussion. However, in 1950, when a section of the Indian Trotskyists, having concluded that their entry into this increasingly right-wing organization was a disaster, sought the International’s support in resuming independent revolutionary political activity, Pablo was adamantly opposed.

Similarly, the Pablo-led International Secretariat gave its blessing to the BLPI’s dissolution in Ceylon. Rather than intervening to oppose this unprincipled merger, which represented a major retreat toward the radical nationalist traditions of Sama Samajism, it immediately accepted the “united” LSSP’s application to succeed the BLPI as the Ceylonese section of the Fourth International.

Pablo and Mandel did this because the BLPI’s liquidation conformed with the liquidationist perspective they were now elaborating with ever greater explicitness. This would soon result in a universal call for Trotskyists throughout the world to forego, as Pablo put it, “all organizational considerations, of formal independence or otherwise,” to pursue “real integration into the mass movement”—that is, adaptation to the Stalinist, social democratic and, in the lesser developed countries, national bourgeois leaders wielding influence over the working class and politically smothering it.<sup>[8]</sup>

The orientation of the united LSSP was centrist and increasingly focused on parliamentary and trade union politics, not the class struggle. This was underscored by the LSSP’s response to the 1953 *hartal*, or all-island general strike. The LSSP leaders were taken back by the enthusiastic response to their call for a one-day nationwide protest on August 12, 1953 against brutal government austerity measures. The working class, which came out in force, was joined by broad sections of the rural masses. In some parts of country the *hartal* movement lasted for several days, forcing the prime minister’s resignation and threatened to bring down the government.

Despite the *hartal*’s resounding success, the LSSP and LSSP-controlled unions did not follow it up with calls for further mass action. They did not initiate a fight to build action committees to expand the struggle, organize defence against state repression, draw the rural masses under the leadership of the working class, and politically prepare for a struggle for power. Rather, they joined the Stalinists and the other groups that had initiated the *hartal* in calling for it to end and focused on efforts to bring down the government through a non-confidence motion in alliance with other opposition parties in parliament.

### **The LSSP stands with Pablo against the ICFI**

I have spent some time tracing the evolution of the BLPI/LSSP prior to the formation of the ICFI in November 1953.

First, it is important to understand why the LSSP had considerable stature within the Fourth International. Even if the real reasons why the Ceylonese Trotskyists had emerged as the principal working class party on the island—its internationalism and revolutionary opposition to

Stalinism and the national bourgeoisie—were increasingly obscured with mere references to its mass work.

Second, such a review demonstrates that by 1953 the LSSP was in profound political crisis and that this crisis was very much part of the crisis then engulfing the Fourth International. This crisis, as has been elaborated in the preceding lectures, was rooted in the emergence of a powerful liquidationist current nurtured by the restabilization of global capitalism and encouraged and given systematic theoretical expression by the Pablo-Mandel-led International Secretariat.

This brings us to the crucial point: Whatever its previous retreats and political backsliding, the decisive turning point in the evolution of the LSSP—that which consummated its break with Trotskyism and rapidly accelerated its descent into national opportunism, paving the way for the Great Betrayal of 1964—was the stand that it took in 1953-54 in response to Cannon’s “Open Letter” and the founding of the ICFI as the political and organizational center of opposition to Pabloite liquidationism.

The LSSP leaders claimed to share many of the ICFI’s objections to the most explicit pro-Stalinist formulations in the documents being produced by the Pabloite International Secretariat. Moreover, the LSSP had had itself to combat a pro-Stalinist faction. In the fall of 1953, virtually contemporaneously with the issuing of the Open Letter, a sizeable section of the LSSP leadership broke away to join the Stalinists.

Yet the LSSP rushed to issue a statement in December 1953 that denounced the IC’s formation on organizational-procedural grounds, based on the claim that the “Open Letter,” in publicly attacking what was the elected leadership of the Fourth International, violated democratic centralist principles. Ignored in all this was the “Open Letter’s” trenchant critique of the liquidationist politics of the Pablo-led International Secretariat and its abuse of its authority to silence and expel those who upheld the historic program of Trotskyism.

In its initial statement denouncing the formation of the ICFI, the LSSP leaders declared that they had yet to consider, and here I cite directly, the “political issues” involved in the split. This refusal to address the substantive political issues would long continue, with the LSSP leaders instead casting themselves as mediators between the IC and the Pabloite liquidationists. In the name of forestalling what they termed a “catastrophic split” and preserving the “unity of the Fourth International,” they pressed the IC to conciliate and compromise with the Pabloites. That is, to conciliate and compromise with those Cannon had rightly indicted for seeking to overturn the Trotskyist program and destroy the historically assembled world Trotskyist cadre. Ultimately, the LSSP participated in the Pabloite Fourth World Congress, lending its political support and prestige to the International Secretariat.

Whatever their differences with Pablo’s pro-Stalinist formulations, the LSSP leaders recoiled from the ICFI’s unequivocal defence of the political foundations of the Trotskyist movement and its declaration of war on opportunism. They correctly perceived the ICFI’s defence of orthodox Trotskyism as cutting across their own centrist politics and increasingly opportunist focus on electoral and trade union politics.

Cannon expended considerable energy in seeking to convince the LSSP leaders of the gravity of the issues at stake and their political obligations to the world movement. In a lengthy February 1954 letter, he reviewed key experiences in the history of the Trotskyist movement that demonstrated that procedural-organizational questions had always been understood to be subordinate to political ones: “The first concern of Trotskyists always has been, and should be now, the defense of our doctrine,” he asserted.<sup>[9]</sup> Cannon pressed the LSSP leaders to fulfill their internationalist obligations by opposing pro-Stalinist forces and “open or covert manifestations of Stalinist conciliationism” not only in their own party, but throughout the world movement.<sup>[10]</sup>

Cannon’s letter to the LSSP is a powerful affirmation of proletarian internationalism as the Fourth International’s strategy, program and first

principle in organizing and conducting its work. Wrote Cannon:

We are fighting now in fulfillment of the highest duty and obligation which we undertook when we came to Trotsky and the Russian Opposition 25 years ago. That is the obligation to put international considerations first of all and above all; to concern ourselves with the affairs of the international movement and its affiliated parties; help them in every way we can; to give them the benefit of our considered opinions, and to seek in return their advice and counsel in the solution of our own problems. *International collaboration is the first principle of internationalism.* We learned that from Trotsky. We believe it, and we are acting according to our belief.” (Emphasis in the original) <sup>[11]</sup>

Cannon was aware of the political pressures placed on a revolutionary party as it engages in mass work and assumes direct responsibility for providing leadership to the working class. He concluded his letter with a prescient warning:

The LSSP—more than any other party, I venture to say—requires an international leadership which will be a source of strength and support to its Trotskyist orthodoxy—the sole condition for its survival and eventual victory—rather than an organizing center of creeping liquidationism and disruption. <sup>[12]</sup>

It is precisely this international collaboration that the LSSP leaders rejected. Had they, or even a section of them, particularly the ex-leaders of the BLPI like Colvin da Silva, Leslie Goonawardene or Doric de Souza, rallied to the ICFI, conditions would have been created for a political rearming of the Trotskyist movement in Ceylon and South Asia.

Having resisted and broken free from those forces represented and led by the ICFI that were defending the historic program of the Fourth International and were committed to fighting Pabloite opportunism, the LSSP veered sharply to the right. It pursued an increasingly unrestrained national-opportunist politics. In short, it orientated ever more openly to direct political alliances with the national bourgeoisie.

Before documenting this and its culmination in the Great Betrayal, I need to make one further point. The pro-Stalinist faction expelled from the LSSP in 1953 was not the only right-wing grouping to emerge from its ranks in this period. In 1950, Philip Gunawardena—who you will recall had played a pivotal role in the retreat from the perspective of Permanent Revolution incarnated in the BLPI—broke from the LSSP to found the VSLP, which later became the MEP. Suffice it to say here that in their descent into unrestrained nationalist, class collaborationist and racialist anti-Tamil politics, the VSLP and then the MEP would foreshadow the evolution of the Pabloite LSSP itself.

### **The LSSP and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party**

As previously discussed, the LSSP responded to the 1953 hartal in an opportunist, rather than a revolutionary, manner. This provided a political opening for a savvy bourgeois politician, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, to make an appeal to the discontented Sinhalese rural masses. Bandaranaike had held leading positions in Ceylon’s right-wing, pro-imperialist United

National Party government until 1951, when he quit to found his own party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, or SLFP.

Bandaranaike had opposed the hartal outright, but in response to the explosive state of class relations it had laid bare, he and his SLFP adopted a radical pose, combining phony anti-imperialist and socialist phrasemongering with virulent anti-Tamil chauvinism.

Rather than resolutely exposing the capitalist and chauvinist politics of the SLFP, the LSSP adapted to Sinhala populism. One expression of this was its opposition to making a Marxist class evaluation of the SLFP, based on its origins, program and social base.

It described the SLFP as “centrist”—a term Marxists employ to denote socialist organizations that use revolutionary rhetoric, while shying away in practice from assisting the workers in drawing revolutionary conclusions, in particular by waging war against the opportunist misleaders of the working class and the bureaucratic organizations they head.

At other times, the LSSP touted the equally, utterly fraudulent claim that the SLFP was a “petty-bourgeois party,” based on the fact that its electoral base was among the rural masses and urban petty bourgeoisie.

In fact, the SLFP drew substantial support from the Ceylonese bourgeoisie. This was for two basic reasons. Because they hoped to strike a better bargain with imperialism under conditions of the postwar boom and by exploiting the possibility of maneuvering with the Stalinist regimes in Moscow and Beijing. And, second, because they saw the SLFP’s Sinhala populist demagoguery as a useful instrument for harnessing the working class to their class aims and dividing it along communal lines. In its calls for select nationalizations and the closing of foreign military bases, the SLFP’s program was not substantially different from that being implemented by Nehru’s Congress Party in India or the Nasser regime in Egypt. If anything, it was more timid.

In 1956, just two years after breaking with the genuine Trotskyists of the ICFI, the LSSP supported the coming to power of Bandaranaike and his SLFP. Employing a prize subterfuge of opportunists everywhere, the LSSP invoked the threat from the most open and ruthless political representatives of the ruling class to subordinate the working class to those who don “progressive” garb and use populist appeals. On the grounds that the UNP was evolving in a fascist direction, the LSSP entered into a “no-contest” electoral pact with the SLFP.

When the SLFP and its ally, the Gunawardena-led VSLP, formed the government, the LSSP adopted what it called a policy of “responsive cooperation”—which is nothing more than a polite way of saying it offered the government its close collaboration. In line with this policy, it voted for the government’s Throne Speech outlining its legislative agenda.

In lending support to the SLFP, the LSSP helped legitimize its vile communal politics. A key plank in Bandaranaike’s program was a Sinhala-only policy, to make Sinhalese, the mother tongue of the Sinhalese majority, the country’s sole official language. This anti-democratic, chauvinist policy found support among sections of the petty bourgeoisie because it would increase their opportunities for public sector employment and reduce the Tamil minority effectively to the status of second-class citizens, thereby asserting Sinhala dominance.

The LSSP opposed the SLFP government’s “Sinhala only” policy. However, unlike the opposition it had mounted to the stripping of the Tamil plantation workers’ citizenship rights in 1948, it did not do so from the standpoint of socialist internationalism and the struggle for the unity of the working class. Rather, the LSSP denounced it on the grounds that it weakened the “nation,” that is, the Sri Lankan capitalist state.

These retreats and betrayals elicited no opposition from the Pabloite International Secretariat.

The International Committee, by contrast, was keenly aware of the LSSP’s role. In 1956, when an advocate of conciliationism with Pabloism within the IC’s ranks enthused over the LSSP being the only “Trotskyist

party” in the world with “a mass base,” US SWP General Secretary Farrell Dobbs rightly rebuked him.

The LSSP’s politics were, he affirmed, “national opportunist.” “Preoccupied with the problems of their own mass movement,” he continued, the LSSP is disinterested in the crisis confronting the Fourth International, and wished “to be left alone.”<sup>[13]</sup>

In March, 1957, the SWP newspaper *The Militant* published an editorial that sharply criticized the LSSP for having refused to demand the release of the jailed Chinese Trotskyists when its representatives visited China as guests of the Mao regime. Shortly thereafter, Gerry Healy, in a letter to Cannon, noted, “Pablo is well aware of the opportunism of our Ceylonese leadership and true to type he is pushing them along. It is impossible for us to remain silent on this matter. Furthermore we have to take into account that the LSSP leaders have moved further away from the orthodox Trotskyist position since 1954.”<sup>[14]</sup>

### **The 1960 elections and the Pabloite International’s response to the LSSP leadership’s first coalition attempt**

Growing opposition within the working class compelled the LSSP to distance itself from the SLFP-VSLP government in the final years of the decade. This included organizing a one-day general strike in opposition to the government’s attack on workers’ democratic rights.

Sections of the ruling class, for their part, became concerned about the ability of the SLFP to advance its interests under conditions of growing class struggle and, as a result of the SLFP’s own promotion of Sinhala chauvinism, anti-Tamil communal riots. In 1959, Bandaranaike was assassinated by a Sinhala extremist Buddhist monk.

As the March 1960 election approached, the LSSP, responding to the growing militancy in the working class, made a show of fighting for “power.” Declaring that the UNP and SLFP were both discredited, it launched a campaign for “a Samasamajist government.”

But far from advancing a revolutionary strategy for the working class based on the class struggle and the program of Permanent Revolution, this campaign was conceived of entirely in electoral terms. The International Secretariat enthusiastically embraced the LSSP’s parliamentary road to socialism, declaring that its Sri Lankan section was engaged in “a decisive struggle for power.”

Underscoring that the LSSP was, in fact, turning further to the right and being transformed into a reformist party that would act as the principal social prop of Sri Lankan capitalism, its electoral platform watered down its opposition to “Sinhala only” and its support for citizenship rights for the Tamil plantation workers.

The election results were a bitter disappointment for the LSSP opportunists. It won substantially fewer seats and only marginally more votes than in 1956, despite standing many more candidates. Perera, the leader of its most right-wing elements, responded by passing a resolution at a party conference authorizing the LSSP to enter into a coalition government with the SLFP, which was trying to cobble together majority support in a hung parliament.

Perera’s coalition policy was overruled by the LSSP Central Committee, but the differences of many of those who voted against joining the government were merely tactical. When a second election had to be held in July because no stable government could be formed, the LSSP entered into a “no-contest” agreement with the SLFP as it had in 1956, and once the SLFP won office, the LSSP voted for its Throne Speech and first budget.

The resolution Perera introduced in March 1960 to authorize forming a coalition government with the capitalist SLFP argued in explicitly

Pabloite terms. It asserted that the SLFP was a “petty-bourgeois party,” and as such—contrary to everything Trotsky wrote—of a fundamentally different character than a “capitalist party.” Based on this false premise, it then claimed that in becoming the SLFP’s junior partner in government, the LSSP would be conducting a form of “entry,” akin to that which the Pabloites were carrying out in “reformist social-democratic parties.”

“Admittedly,” the resolution continued, “we are taking entryism a stage further by accepting office. But is this not the best way of taking the masses through the experience necessary to dispel their illusions, and creating confidence in our genuineness. A few bold progressive measures sponsored by us will enable them to learn more than years of propaganda by us.”<sup>[15]</sup>

Six months later, in September 1960, and with the aim of covering its own tracks, the Pabloite International Secretariat wrote a lengthy document to the LSSP. It made limited criticisms of the Perera leadership’s unbridled opportunism, while, in fact, giving the LSSP political license to continue its maneuvers with the capitalist SLFP. The Pabloite leadership endorsed collaboration with a capitalist government in implementing “progressive measures” or defending “gains,” when the “masses” are “not ready to launch an anti-capitalist movement on a revolutionary political basis.” In other words, precisely what Perera claimed the LSSP was doing.

“We accept,” the International Secretariat letter went on to declare, “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.”<sup>[16]</sup> The Pabloite world leadership thus left the door wide open for its Sri Lankan section to collaborate with the SLFP government, paving the path for its eventual entry into the cabinet just four years later.

In keeping with its opportunist-coalitionist orientation to the Sinhala chauvinist SLFP and its friendly relations with Gunawardena’s VSSP, which had quit the government in 1959 and renamed itself the MEP, the LSSP continued to adapt to and make far-reaching concessions to the communalist agitation against the Tamils.

In a letter written by Healy to the SWP National Committee in June 1963 condemning its reunification with the Pabloites, he pointed with bitterness to a report in *The Militant* lauding the joint May Day rally the LSSP had held with Stalinists and Gunawardena. “To its eternal shame,” wrote Healy, the LSSP had bowed to Gunawardena’s demand that representatives of the Tamil plantation workers be excluded from the rally’s platform. “It is now freely admitted in the LSSP that the leaders are prepared to make real and large concessions on the question of parity of status for Tamil and Singhalese. This is the logic of the capitulation which has led them to support the capitalist government of Mrs. Bandaranaike.”<sup>[17]</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the United Secretariat gave its blessing to the LSSP’s support for negotiations between the Ceylonese and Indian governments to “repatriate”—in truth, expel—hundreds of thousands of Tamils whose ancestors had been brought to Sri Lanka in the 19th century to serve as plantation labourers.

### **The United Left Front—or how the Great Betrayal was prepared**

The 1963 May Day rally in Colombo referenced by Healy was preparatory to a new maneuver—the creation of a Popular Front-type alliance, formally called the United Left Front, between the LSSP, the Ceylonese CP and Gunawardena’s MEP.

The Pabloite reunification Congress, as was discussed in the preceding lecture, explicitly renounced the program of Permanent Revolution. It

hailed the bourgeois nationalist Cuban revolution as opening a new path to world socialism, extolled the revolutionary capacities of the petty bourgeoisie, and renounced the need for revolutionary proletarian parties. “The weakness of the enemy in backward countries,” it declared, “has opened the possibility of coming to power with a blunted instrument.”<sup>[18]</sup>

Fittingly—or to be more precise, in accordance with this perspective—it also gave its blessing to the LSSP-CP-MEP alliance. The LSSP, the Pabloite Congress asserted, has “correctly raised the question of a United Left Front, both to arrest the movement to the right and to help these masses to move towards an alternative left.”<sup>[19]</sup>

Shortly thereafter, in August 1963, the United Left Front, or ULF, was officially inaugurated. The ULF’s very name was a deceit. It had nothing to do with the united front tactic as elaborated by Trotsky, who had always insisted on the political independence of the revolutionary party and that any joint action with opposed tendencies must be for specific immediate goals and involve no mixing of programs or banners.

Rather, as the Sri Lankan SEP explained in an important series of articles published in 2014, the United Left Front “replicated the Stalinist Popular Fronts of the 1930s formed on the basis of a common political program with opportunist and bourgeois parties that shackled the working class to the bourgeoisie, private property and the state, and blocked its independent revolutionary activity.”<sup>[20]</sup>

The ULF’s 16-point program called for various reforms, including nationalizations of the tea and rubber plantations but in no way went beyond the framework of capitalist politics. This was exemplified in its acceptance of the SLFP government’s communalist anti-Tamil policies.

It was on the basis of the United Left Front that the unions—many of them directly led by its three constituent elements—then formed an alliance around 21 points. Major struggles were to erupt under the banner of the 21-point alliance. But the ULF and the unions worked in tandem to politically defang the swelling mass working class upsurge.

Through the combined mechanisms of the United Left Front and the 21-point movement, the working class was confined to militant trade union struggles, while the LSSP and its allies maneuvered in parliament and the broader arena of Sri Lankan capitalist politics through the ULF. The Stalinists and the Gunawardena-led racialist MEP were, it need be emphasized, even more oriented toward an alliance with the SLFP than the LSSP. In keeping with the Stalinist-Menshevik canard of the two-stage revolution, Stalinist parties throughout Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa were vociferous advocates of the subordination of the working class to the supposedly “progressive,” “anti-imperialist” wing of the national bourgeoisie.

Within the LSSP there was a left wing that opposed the United Left Front and warned that it was a stepping stone toward coalition. However, the Pabloite United Secretariat suppressed criticism of the LSSP leadership. It justified this by citing the purported need in the aftermath of the 1963 reunification to relax “discipline.” The LSSP leaders, it said, had to be given the chance “to prove in action the sincerity of their stand.” “To deliberately heat up the atmosphere in the LSSP” would be injurious and imperil the “unity of the party”—that is, its domination by a virulent national-opportunist right wing.<sup>[21]</sup>

In April 1964, just two months before the LSSP’s Great Betrayal, the United Secretariat sent a letter to the LSSP leadership in which it hailed the ULF, saying that it could “provide another Cuba or Algeria and prove to be of even greater inspiration to revolutionary-minded workers throughout the world.”<sup>[22]</sup>

By then, Perera had already entered into back channel talks with the prime minister, Madame Bandaranaike, who had assumed the leadership of the SLFP in the wake of her husband’s assassination.

In a May 10, 1964 speech, Bandaranaike outlined the acute crisis facing the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and consequently why the LSSP leaders needed to be brought into government so as to tame and politically

suppress the working class. “Some,” she explained, “feel that these [strike] troubles can be eliminated by the establishment of a dictatorship. Others say that the workers should be made to work at the point of gun and bayonet. Still others maintain that a national government should be formed to solve this problem. I have considered these ideas separately and in the context of world events. My conclusion is that none of these solutions will help to get us where we want to go. ... Therefore, gentlemen, I decided to initiate talks with the leaders of the working class, particularly Mr. Philip Gunawardena and Mr. N.M. Perera.”<sup>[23]</sup>

The Pabloite United Secretariat responded to the LSSP’s impending entry into a capitalist government by appealing to the LSSP to instead advocate for a United Left Front government and to “remain faithful to its long tradition of uncompromising struggle against imperialism and the national bourgeoisie.”<sup>[24]</sup> This was asked of a party that, with the United Secretariat’s connivance, had for years adapted to Sinhala populism and repeatedly blocked openly with the capitalist SLFP in the name of fighting imperialism and the right.

## The Great Betrayal

On June 9, 1964, the LSSP formally joined the government, with Perera named finance minister and two other LSSP leaders awarded cabinet posts.

At a party conference held June 6-7 to ratify entry into the government, three resolutions were presented: 1) that of the Perera-led right wing, which hailed the SLFP for leading a “national struggle,” won 501 votes. 2) that of a so-called “center” faction led by former BLPI leaders Colvin R. de Silva and Leslie Goonewardene called for the LSSP to hold out for a coalition agreement between the SLFP and the United Left Front as a whole, claiming this would provide better grounds for achieving a “progressive solution to the crisis” beyond the “framework of capitalism.”<sup>[25]</sup> It received 75 votes. 3) 159 delegates voted for the resolution of the Revolutionary Minority, which unequivocally condemned any coalition with the SLFP. A coalition, it warned, would result in “open class collaboration, disorientation of the masses, (and) the division of the working class,” and thus strengthen the very right-wing forces the proponents of coalition claimed to be fighting.<sup>[26]</sup> Upon its rejection, they walked out of the Congress and proclaimed the founding of a new party, the LSSP (Revolutionary).

The ICFI had been closely following the developments in Ceylon, recognizing their historic character for the world Trotskyist movement. Healy flew to Colombo but was denied entry into the LSSP congress on the grounds that he was not a member of the Pabloite United Secretariat. Healy, however, did engage outside the congress venue with workers and youth opposed to the coalition. And the Pabloites’ efforts both in the immediate and longer term to prevent the IC’s exposure of the criminal role of the LSSP and the United Secretariat from reaching the most advanced elements failed.

On July 5, 1964, the ICFI issued the statement which I cited in introducing this report. It drew the essential lessons of the Great Betrayal the Pabloites perpetrated in Ceylon for the international working class. That betrayal, it concluded, “marks the end of a whole epoch of the evolution of the Fourth International.” It continued: “It is in direct service to imperialism, in the preparation of a defeat for the working class that revisionism in the world Trotskyist movement has found its expression.”

The next passage is no less pivotal. It reads:

The task of reconstructing the Fourth International must be

undertaken from the firm basis of constructing revolutionary proletarian parties in every country in struggle against the bureaucratic and opportunist servants of imperialism and against their defenders, the revisionists who usurp the name of Trotskyism and the Fourth International.<sup>[27]</sup>

In addition, Healy wrote a comprehensive analysis of the LSSP's political degeneration that highlighted the role the international Pabloite leadership had played in it, titled "Ceylon: The Great Betrayal." It observed that the future of the LSSP's revolutionary wing "depends mainly now on a serious study of this relationship" and of the ICFI's struggle against Pabloism.<sup>[28]</sup>

The response of the Pabloite United Secretariat to the entry of their Ceylonese section into a capitalist government was an utterly cynical washing of its hands. It expelled the 501 LSSP members, who had voted for Perera's coalition resolution. For months, however, it took no disciplinary action against the so-called "center," which had advocated the ULF enter the government en bloque and remained loyal members of the LSSP as it assumed direct responsibility for managing the affairs of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and suppressing the working class.

Hansen and the SWP leadership, meanwhile, responded to the demand of the party's pro-IC minority for a discussion of the events in Ceylon and their meaning for the world Trotskyist movement by immediately suspending all its members.

### **The catastrophic consequences of Pabloite opportunism**

This school appropriately began with a tribute to Comrade Wije Dias, who for 35 years served as the general secretary of the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI. Wije entered political life through the LSSP's Youth Leagues, after entering university in 1962. He was attracted to what he thought was a Trotskyist party in the leadership of a growing movement of the working class and fighting to impart to it a revolutionary-socialist direction. In fact, what the LSSP leaders were preparing was a historic betrayal.

The IC statement announcing his death at age 80 states:

Wije was an implacable protagonist of the socialist internationalist program of Permanent Revolution and fighter for the political independence of the working class. He was unyielding in his defense of Marxist and Trotskyist principles because he had witnessed the catastrophic consequences—in the form of political disorientation, reaction and tragic loss of life—that result from their abandonment and betrayal.<sup>[29]</sup>

The Pabloite betrayal in Sri Lanka has had horrific consequences for the workers and toilers of the island and, indeed, all South Asia. Today, six decades later, the Sri Lankan and South Asia working class and our party are still labouring under its impact.

The whole tortured history of Sri Lanka over the past six decades—including an ethno-communal civil war which led to more than 100,000 deaths—attests to what was and is at stake in the struggle against Pabloite revisionism and all forms of national opportunism. The LSSP's transformation into the principal social prop of bourgeois rule on the island opened the door for the rise of the petty-bourgeois JVP. It won a following among impoverished rural Sinhala youth by preaching the

armed struggle on the basis of a mixture of Maoism, Castroism and Sinhala chauvinism.

At the same time, the LSSP's counterrevolutionary alliance with the party that had championed "Sinhala first" chauvinism shattered the confidence of the Tamil masses that they could look to the working class, under revolutionary socialist leadership, to defend their democratic rights. Ultimately, this would lead to the emergence of the LTTE and like-minded Tamil nationalist-separatist groups from among the student youth of the Jaffna Peninsula.

The SLFP-LSSP coalition government established in June 1964 did not long endure after carrying through its principal task, derailing the working class upsurge around the 21 demands.

But in 1970, the LSSP was the SLFP's principal partner in a second SLFP-led coalition government. With Perera as its finance minister until 1975, the SLFP-LSSP-Communist Party government would carry out massive attacks on the working class and oppressed toilers. In 1971, it brutally suppressed a JVP-led uprising, killing 15,000 rural youth.

Following the well-trodden path of Sri Lankan bourgeois politics, the coalition supplemented its savage suppression of the youth uprising with a constitutional reform that enshrined key Sinhala chauvinist principles in the island's fundamental law. Authored by Colvin da Silva, who had once powerfully articulated the perspective of Permanent Revolution, it imposed discriminatory job and education quotas on the Tamil minority and made Buddhism the state religion and Sinhalese the sole official language.

The impact of the LSSP's Great Betrayal reverberated far beyond the island. Throughout Asia and around the world, the LSSP's betrayal gave a political boost to increasingly discredited Stalinist and Maoist parties. The Indian Stalinists were roiled by crisis throughout the 1960s as a result of the Sino-Soviet split, the Communist Party of India's support for the Indian bourgeoisie in the India-China border war, and growing opposition within its ranks to its close ties with the ruling Congress Party. But because the Trotskyist movement in South Asia had been liquidated by the Pabloites in the 1950s, a process that culminated in the Great Betrayal of 1964, the warring Stalinist factions were left unchallenged and able to retain their political control over the working class. The Naxalite movement that came to the fore in this period pointed to the LSSP's betrayal to justify their Maoist, anti-working class politics of "protracted people's war" and a "new democratic revolution" in alliance with the reputed anti-imperialist, anti-feudal wing of the bourgeoisie.

### **The political struggle that led to the emergence of the RCL**

Healy's June 1964 trip to Sri Lanka was the opening salvo in the struggle to draw out the significance of the Great Betrayal for the global working class, above all, regarding the struggle to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership through the building of the Fourth International. A key element in this was the fight to clarify those revolutionary-minded elements in Sri Lanka who were repelled by the LSSP's actions and groping to find a way forward amid the confusion and disorientation the betrayal and political suppression of the working class produced.

From the beginning, the central point made by Healy and the ICFI was that the betrayal was politically prepared by the Pabloite world leadership in Paris. It was the outcome of a longstanding crisis in the world Trotskyist movement, intensified by the SWP's desertion to the Pabloites in 1963, which could only be overcome through a global offensive against Pabloite revisionism.

The LSSP (Revolutionary) was still-born from the standpoint of revolutionary politics because it refused to break with the United



Secretariat. At its very first conference, its entire leadership combined to block a resolution introduced by an ICFI sympathizer to debate the “international question”—that is, the ICFI’s struggle against Pabloite opportunism.

The Sri Lankan SEP’s *Historical and International Foundations* document discusses at length the process of political struggle and differentiation whereby, under the influence and guidance of the British Trotskyists, a group of extraordinary young people broke from the political orbit of the LSSP (R) and its orientation of pressuring the LSSP and Stalinist leaders and undertook to build a new revolutionary party of the Sri Lankan working class based on the lessons of the ICFI’s struggle against Pabloite revisionism. Chief among these were Keerthi Balasuriya, who was just 19 years old when elected the general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) at its founding congress in June 1968, and Wijie Dias.

A key issue at the RCL’s founding congress concerned the continuity of the struggle for Trotskyism. As the SEP Sri Lanka has explained, Comrade Keerthi opposed “a tendency that viewed the congress as the unification of a national Sri Lankan revolutionary current that traced its history through the LSSP, LSSP (R) and Shakthi (a left grouping in which many of the RCL leaders had participated) with the ICFI.”<sup>[30]</sup> The congress unanimously adopted a resolution for affiliation with the ICFI based on the understanding that its struggle against Pabloite revisionism had ensured the continuity of the Fourth International and its lessons were critical to resolving the crisis of proletarian leadership. “This Congress,” it declared, “dedicates firmly to the task of building the party of the proletarian revolution in Ceylon as a section of the ICFI in an intransigent struggle against all forms of revisionism and declares that this task is inseparably bound up with active intervention in the class struggle to the maximum possible extent in every place and under all circumstances.”<sup>[31]</sup>

Because they were basing themselves on a fight to assimilate the lessons of the ICFI’s struggle to defend and develop the historic programme of the Fourth International, the RCL leadership, and especially Comrade Keerthi, were acutely sensitive to any retreat from the program of Permanent Revolution. It goes beyond the scope of this lecture, but it should be noted that even before the founding of the RCL, this leadership had taken issue with Banda’s glorification of Maoist “armed struggle.” And in 1971, the RCL sought to reverse the line of “critical support” for India’s December 1971 war on Pakistan which the SLL had advanced in the name of the ICFI on the basis of an acceptance of Indira Gandhi’s cynical claims that New Delhi was intervening to support the Bangladesh liberation struggle. However, in a sign of the growing crisis within the SLL, the RCL’s criticisms were suppressed and never discussed in the IC.

### **Pabloism, the Great Betrayal and the struggle for Trotskyism in the US**

As previously noted, precisely one year before the entry of the Pabloite LSSP into Ceylon’s capitalist government, the Socialist Workers Party voted to reunify with the Pabloites, forming the so-called United Secretariat.

At the SWP’s June 1963 congress, held just days before the Pabloite world congress that formalized and implemented reunification, a minority led by Tim Wohlforth and working in conjunction with and under the political direction and discipline of the IC voted against reunification.

Significantly, a second grouping, a minority led by James Robertson that claimed to sympathize with the ICFI and would go on to form the Spartacist League, abstained. The Robertson group claimed all sorts of differences with the SWP leadership. Yet on the central question facing

the world Trotskyist movement, one that had rightly been the subject of a fierce political battle during the preceding two-and-a-half years, the Robertson group refused to side with the ICFI. In 1953, in initiating the founding of the ICFI, Cannon had declared that the “lines of cleavage between” Pabloite revisionism and “orthodox Trotskyism are so deep that no compromise is possible either politically or organizationally.”<sup>[32]</sup>

Ten years later, when called upon to declare whether it agreed with the SWP leadership that the differences that had led to the 1953 split had been superseded by subsequent events—especially the SWP and International Secretariat’s common evaluation of the Cuban revolution—and that all discussion of the 1953 split should be suppressed so as to press forward with “reunification,” the Robertson group abstained.

At the urging of the British Trotskyists, the pro-IC minority remained within the SWP after it broke with the IC and rejoined the Pabloites. It did so in order to continue the fight for political clarification within the SWP on the central questions pertaining to world revolutionary perspectives and the fight to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership through the building of the Fourth International. This was a correct decision, very different from politically endorsing or participating in reunification. It was born of a correct appraisal of the central task facing the supporters of the IC under conditions where the SWP, the historic party of Trotskyism in the United States, was in the process of liquidating itself into petty-bourgeois radicalism, and on the conviction that events would vindicate and clarify the decisive significance of the IC’s struggle against reunification.

Although a secondary matter, it should also be noted that it was the SWP leadership that was most insistent that there could be no discussion of the 1953 split. This was because it could not politically explain, from the standpoint of the struggle for the historical program and principles of Trotskyism, its own trajectory. Instead, it suppressed all discussion of 1953. At the same time, it mendaciously asserted that the SWP had been right in initiating the IC’s founding a decade before, but that since then the Pabloites had come over to its positions. This Mandel and his supporters vehemently denied.

Remaining inside the SWP meant the pro-IC minority was subjected to the SWP leadership’s factionally motivated maneuvers and compelled to forego certain opportunities in public party work. But the Wohlforth-led minority did so because it recognized the importance of its role in the IC’s struggle to clarify the SWP cadre and the international Trotskyist movement.

The events in Sri Lanka—the entry of the official section of the United Secretariat into the island’s bourgeois government—was, of course, another matter. It was a historic betrayal which, as this lecture has shown, had the hands of the international Pabloite leadership in Paris all over it and which the SWP had abetted.

The Wohlforth-led pro-IC minority responded in a principled fashion. It demanded an internal party discussion of the LSSP’s historic betrayal and its meaning for the world Trotskyist movement. On June 30, 1964, it issued a mimeographed statement, distributed exclusively to party members, outlining why such a discussion was urgently needed. For this crime, Wohlforth, Fred Mazelis and seven others were suspended from SWP membership 10 days later.

The statement issued by the minority merits citing at some length. It reads in part:

During the whole period from 1961 to 1963 we reiterated time and time again, in political solidarity with the International Committee, that a reunification of the Fourth International without the fullest political discussion *prior* to the actual reunification could only lead to disaster and the further disintegration of the international movement and the party here. *Our position has been*

fully vindicated. ...

There can no longer be any further refusal to face up to the political, theoretical and methodological crisis tearing apart our party and the international formation to which it is presently in political solidarity. *For the very survival of the party a thoroughgoing discussion of these questions must be organized immediately in all branches.*

We are well aware that such a discussion in between preconvention periods is an extraordinary step. We are demanding such a discussion precisely because we face a crisis of the most extraordinary character. Leninists are never fetishistic over organizational matters. They willingly make adjustments in organizational forms to fit the political needs of the movement. To perpetuate a sterile discussion during a period when the party has important external work to do is a criminal act against the Bolshevik party. *Not to organize a discussion when a deep political crisis tears apart the party and the international movement is at least as criminal an action.* Those who counterpose pressing and necessary party building work to a process essential to the very survival of the party itself are in no sense of the term Leninists. (Emphasis in the original.)<sup>[33]</sup>

The members of the pro-IC minority responded to their suspension by forming the American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI). Its break with the now-Pabloite SWP was thus over the most fundamental international and historical questions.

This was not accidental, nor incidental. It arose out of the IC's approach to the fight against reunification and the agreement, on that basis, that it secured with the Wohlforth-led minority.

As the US SEP *Historical and International Foundations* document emphasizes:

The greatest strength of this tendency was its recognition that the political crisis of the SWP had to be approached as an international problem. The struggle within the SWP, therefore, could not be conducted from the standpoint of obtaining a tactical advantage in the discussion of one or another political issue. Instead, the basic aim of the discussion was to achieve political and theoretical clarification of the central problems of revolutionary perspective in the Fourth International.<sup>[34]</sup>

Here again was a fundamental difference with the Robertson group. Initially, Robertson and his supporters were part of a single minority with Wohlforth, Mazelis and others that professed support for the IC. But they refused to work under the discipline of the IC, decrying it as "bureaucratic centralism." Consequently, the pro-IC minority inside the SWP had to be reorganized in early 1962.

In striking contrast with the IC supporters, whose exclusion from the SWP revolved around the most important issues of political principle, the Robertson group was expelled from the SWP in late 1963 over its violation of SWP discipline to pursue what it perceived as opportunities in building its faction through external or public work. This was bound up with its contention that the key issue was the SWP's stand on what it termed the central problem of the American revolution—the fight against racial segregation and the oppression of the African American minority.

Nevertheless, following the establishment of the ACFI and under conditions where the Robertson group, now known as Spartacist, continued to claim that it was in political sympathy with the IC, Healy and the British Trotskyists sought to put this claim to the test by encouraging

the two self-avowed pro-IC tendencies in the US to work toward a principled fusion. As a result, an invitation was extended to Spartacist to participate in the ICFI's 1966 congress.

Some comrades are no doubt familiar with Robertson's provocative conduct at the congress, whose discipline he flouted. This was entirely in keeping with the Robertson group's previous actions and served to demonstrate that its political physiognomy as a petty-bourgeois nationalist clique focused around Robertson had become fixed.

Important as this was, an even more substantive issue was Robertson and Spartacist's opposition to the IC's assessment of the counterrevolutionary role of Pabloite opportunism—in which the roots and world-historic significance of the LSSP's Great Betrayal of 1964 was an important element.

In April 1966, less than two years after the Sri Lankan section of the United Secretariat had been called to government to rescue the bourgeoisie, as Madame Bandaranaike had herself explained, Robertson took the floor of the IC's Third Congress to challenge the ICFI's evaluation of the counterrevolutionary role of Pabloism and the urgency of the struggle against it.

Robertson took specific issue with the IC's insistence that world imperialism was increasingly dependent on the Pabloite revisionists, who served to prop up Stalinism and social democracy and in the countries historically oppressed by imperialism, the national bourgeoisie. The Spartacist guru declared, "We take issue with the notion that the present crisis of capitalism is so sharp and deep that Trotskyist revisionism is needed to tame the workers, in a way comparable to the degeneration of the Second and Third Internationals. Such an erroneous estimation would have as its point of departure an enormous overestimation of our present significance, and would accordingly be disorienting."<sup>[35]</sup>

As the US SEP founding document observes:

All that divides Marxism, theoretically and politically, from petty-bourgeois radicalism was summed up in this statement. In essence, Robertson denied the objective social and political significance of the conflict within the Fourth International. The lessons of Lenin's struggle to build the Bolshevik Party in the struggle against revisionism, and, later, of Trotsky's struggle against Stalinism and various forms of centrism, were ignored. The struggle against Pabloism within the Fourth International—so clearly connected to major political and social processes in the aftermath of World War II—was derided by Robertson as a subjectively motivated squabble between various individuals.<sup>[36]</sup>

The political differentiation and separation from the petty-bourgeois nationalist Spartacist clique were a critical element in establishing the internationalist character and proletarian class orientation of the tendency formed by the American supporters of the ICFI.

The subsequent evolution of the Spartacist League as a virulent pro-Stalinist Pabloite group, characterized by extreme subjectivism and hostility to the ICFI, the Workers League and the SEP, is beyond the scope of this lecture. Here I will only reference *Globalization and the International Working Class: A Marxist Assessment*, which, through a dissection of the nationalist politics of the Spartacist League, further elaborated the seminal analysis the ICFI had made of capitalist globalization, adding new succulence and concreteness to the program of world socialist revolution. Not coincidentally, it was published in 1998 as the ICFI was founding the WSW.

In November 1966, based on the lessons of the Third IC Congress, the ACFI transformed itself into the Workers League. Thus, as a result of the struggle led by the SLL against the SWP's embrace of Pabloite

liquidationism, the historical continuity of the Trotskyist movement in America, the center of world imperialism, was preserved.

## Conclusion

Changing what needs to be changed, the Great Betrayal in Ceylon was the August 4, 1914 of Pabloite revisionism, where the full consequences of its abandonment of the program of the Fourth International and descent into national opportunism were laid bare.

It demonstrated incontrovertibly the counterrevolutionary role of Pabloite revisionism. The events in Sri Lanka foreshadowed the role the Pabloites would play as a secondary agency of imperialism in assisting Stalinism and social democracy in politically suffocating the worldwide revolutionary offensive of the working class between 1968 and 1975.

But it is not only the betrayal that we must remember. The politics that led to it were opposed. In the fight against the unprincipled reunification of 1963, the British Trotskyists and their supporters in the pro-IC minority in the SWP warned repeatedly that it would lead to political disasters. In the aftermath of the Great Betrayal, the IC fought to transform it into a strategic experience for the world working class and place its lessons at the heart of the fight to build the Fourth International.

The SWP leadership's accelerating political retreat, beginning in the mid-1950s and its ultimate succumbing to Pabloite opportunism and 1963 break with the ICFI, pushed the genuine Trotskyists onto the defensive.

However, under the leadership of the SLL, the IC mounted a counteroffensive. In so doing, it struck powerful political-theoretical blows in which the key issues of program and perspective were clarified. This included laying the foundations for the building of new sections in two countries critical to the history of the Fourth International—America and Sri Lanka—and two parts of the world, North America, the center of world imperialism, and South Asia, today the world's most populous region, that are key battlegrounds in the world socialist revolution.

There was nothing inevitable about the role that the Workers League and RCL would play in the 1982-86 split with the WRP and its immediate aftermath. However, the leading role that they did play was bound up with the powerful Trotskyist traditions that had been laid at their foundation, as a result of the IC's struggle against reunification and the Great Betrayal.

On July 20, 2022, the Sri Lankan SEP issued a critical statement titled "For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses in Sri Lanka!" It outlined a revolutionary strategy to guide the struggle for workers' power in response to the mass upsurge that earlier that month had chased the hated President Gotabaya Rajapaksa from power and created the revolutionary crisis that continues to grip the island. One crucial passage reads:

In refusing to take part in the talks on forming an interim government, the SEP drew on the bitter political lessons of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's catastrophic 1964 betrayal of the essential political principles of Trotskyism. ... The entry of the LSSP into the bourgeois "Sinhalese First" government of Bandaranaike not only marked the end of the "21 demands" movement. It demoralised the masses, promoted ethno-linguistic strife over class struggle, and paved the way for the domination of reactionary communal politics and decades of civil war.

The SEP has not and never will go down the LSSP's road of betrayal. We reject all forms of direct and indirect support to capitalist governments.<sup>[37]</sup>

In its analysis of the development of the class struggle, the temper of the masses and the tasks of the party, the statement also makes explicit reference to the experience of the 1917 October Revolution and the Spanish revolution. It is, of course, animated by the IC's analysis of the systemic crisis of world capitalism and our understanding that this is the fifth phase in the history of the Trotskyist movement.

This statement was the outcome of intense international collaboration and was the last on which Comrade Wije worked. It embodies the ICFI's approach to the history of the Fourth International and the strategic experiences of the world working class, which must animate the work of all of its sections and supporting sections in providing revolutionary leadership to the growing global working class upsurge.

[1] Letter of the National Committee of the SLL to the National Committee of the SWP, Jan. 2, 1961—*Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 3*, p. 49.

[2] *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 4*, p. 255.

[3] <https://www.trotskyist.org/archive/1939/07/india.htm>

[4] As cited in "Editorial," *Fourth International*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (July 1987), pp.vii-viii.

[5] "The Situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the Revolutionary Communist Party," <https://www.marxists.org/library/ri-15-1/05.html>

[6] As cited in *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)*, p. 42.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[8] As cited in David North, *The Heritage We Defend*, p. 193.

[9] James P. Cannon to L. Goonewardene, Feb. 23, 1954, *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Vol. 2*, p. 106.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 113.

[13] As cited in *The Heritage We Defend*, pp. 260-61.

[14] G. Healy to James P. Cannon, May 10, 1957, *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Vol. 3*, p. 31.

[15] As cited in *The Heritage We Defend*, pp. 398-399.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 399.

[17] G. Healy to the National Committee of the SWP, June 12, 1963, *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Vol. 4*, p. 162.

[18] "Dynamics of World History," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/icc-international/1963-1985/usfi/7thWC/usfi01.htm>

[19] As cited in, G. Healy, "Ceylon the Great Betrayal," *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Vol. 4*, pp. 233-34.

[20] "The LSSP vs Great Betrayal," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/icc-international/2014/lssp-s14.html>

[21] As cited in *The Heritage We Defend*, p. 401.

[22] As cited in "The Great Betrayal," *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Vol. 4*, p. 235.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 241.

[24] Letter from the IEC (Pabloite) to members of the LSSP, May 25, 1964, *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Vol. 4*, p. 265.

[25] Resolution of the 'Centre' Group to the LSSP Congress, June 6-7, 1964, *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Vol. 4*, p. 257.

[26] Resolution of the 'Revolutionary Minority' to the LSSP Congress, June 6-7, 1964, *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Vol. 4*, p. 256.

[27] July 5, 1964 IC Statement, *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 4*, p. 255.

[28] *Trotskyism versus Revisionism, Volume 4*, p. 245.

[29] "Comrade Wije Dias: A Fighter for Trotskyism (August 27, 1964-July 27, 2022)," <https://www.marxists.org/en/articles/2022/07/28/pers-j28.html>

[30] *The Historical and International Foundations of the SEP (Sri Lanka)*, section 17-15, p. 81.

[31] As cited in *Ibid.*, section 17-16, pp. 81-82.

[32] Open Letters of Trotskyists From the World, 1953,

[33] As cited in *The Heritage We Defend*, pp. 403-4.

[34] *The Historical and International Foundations of the SEP (US)*, p. 85,  
<https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/foundations-us/38.html>

[35] As cited in *WWSW*, p. 88  
<https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/foundations-us/39.html>

[36] Ibid.

[37] <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2022/07/21/pers-j21.html>



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