

Report to Sri Lanka meetings

Imperialism, the genocide in Gaza, and the world struggle for socialism

Joseph Kishore
18 December 2023

The following remarks were delivered by Socialist Equality Party (US) National Secretary Joseph Kishore to a meeting titled “Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the 21st Century” at New Town Hall in Colombo on Sunday, December 10 to mark the centenary of the founding of the Trotskyist movement. The meeting was organised by the Sri Lankan SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

Kishore addressed another meeting organised by SEP/YSSE on the same theme at the University of Peradeniya which was sponsored by the university’s Political Science Society on December 7.

I am very pleased to be able to travel to Sri Lanka and address this meeting in Colombo. It is a great honor to be able to address workers and youth in this country, and to meet with comrades who have played such a long and essential role in the history of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Leaders of the Sri Lankan section are justly revered throughout the international socialist movement for their principled struggle for Trotskyism in the face often of violent opposition from the ruling class, including Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya, who died 36 years ago this coming weekend, and Comrade Wije Dias, who passed away on July 27, 2022. It is with pride that all members of the SEP in the US point to the origins of our predecessor organization, the Workers League, in the demand for a discussion on the Great Betrayal in Sri Lanka, about which I will speak later.

This meeting is part of a series of meetings throughout the world marking the centenary of the Trotskyist movement, the socialism of the 20th and 21st centuries.

I will discuss the significance of this anniversary, but I want to begin with a review of the international political situation. It is a basic principle of Marxism that it is impossible to develop an orientation in any particular country based on the national peculiarities of that country. Or, rather, beginning from these peculiarities leads to opportunist and bankrupt conclusions. We live and fight within the framework of a global capitalist system, and *workers and young people confront at every point global issues.*

We are meeting today under conditions of an escalating series of intersecting global crises that have reached a critical mass. Two basic tendencies predominate, the tendency toward world war and political reaction, on the one hand, and the tendency toward socialist revolution on the other. Which of these will prevail will determine the fate of all of mankind.

For the past two months, the attention of the world has been focused on the events in Gaza, where a war crime of historic proportions has been carried out by the Israeli government. A population of 2.3 million people has been systematically bombed, murdered, starved, deprived of medical care and driven from their homes. Every day for the past two months, an

average of more than 130 children have been killed, far more than in any war in modern history.

The death toll is now more than 17,000 people in Gaza since October, 70 percent of whom were women and children. More than 200 doctors and medics have been killed, along with 130 UN employees and 77 journalists. The latest atrocity is the targeted killing of Palestinian author and educator, Dr. Refaat al-Ar’eer, who was murdered along with his entire family on December 6.

After a brief “pause,” during which the Israeli military refueled and reloaded, Israel has launched a ground invasion of the south, where the population has swelled massively over the past eight weeks due to the influx of war refugees from the north.

Not only is a genocide and war crime being carried out, but—and this is crucial for workers in every country to understand—it has the full support of the Biden administration in the United States and all the governments of the US-NATO axis. Every atrocity by Israel has been preceded and followed by statements of support from White House officials that there are no “red lines,” that Israel has the “full support” of the United States.

As Israel was preparing to bomb the south this past week, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby defended the targeting of civilians, claiming that Israel has given Gazans “a list, a map—it’s online—a list of areas where they can go to be more safe. There’s not too many modern militaries, in advance of conducting operations, that would actually do that.”

How thoughtful of Israel! They tell Palestinians where they will have to flee or risk being incinerated in bombs, provided that they can access the online list via a QR code, under conditions in which communication systems rarely work. In fact, Kirby is simply rationalizing mass murder, on the grounds that if Palestinians are in a place where they are bombed, then it must be because they refused to follow the (completely illegal) orders of Israel to evacuate.

Then, on Friday, the US vetoed a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire. The US is not only backing, but it is actively assisting, in an Israeli policy aimed at driving Palestinians out of Gaza, ethnically cleansing the whole region, and killing anyone who refuses to leave.

Something of a turning point has been reached. American imperialism is guilty of many crimes in its long record of war and counter-revolution, from the dropping of the atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to the Vietnam War, to the destruction of Iraq and Afghanistan.

But what is striking now is the openness with which homicidal violence is carried out. They do not hide from their crimes; they hardly even try to lie about them.

The open support for genocidal actions can only be understood as part of the unfolding global war of the US-NATO axis, which is or will impact the population of the entire world.

For American imperialism, support for Israel’s actions is bound up with

its striving for world hegemony. Most directly, the Biden administration has utilized Israel's actions in Gaza as an opportunity to deploy massive military hardware to the Mediterranean, explicitly targeting Iran. A conflict with Iran is itself seen in relation to the US conflict with both Russia and China.

The war on Gaza and the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia are in fact two fronts in a rapidly escalating world war. The war over Ukraine is now nearly two years old. At the time of the Russian invasion in February 2022, the Biden administration in the US, governments throughout Europe and beyond, along with their associated media outlets asserted that the war was "unprovoked," that the response of the US and the NATO powers was directed by concern over the "national sovereignty" of Ukraine, that the US and NATO powers were defending "democracy" against "dictatorship."

Who can believe any of this? If the alliance of US and NATO imperialism with fascists in Ukraine did not dispel these lies, then their support for Israel's genocide in Gaza should mark the end for all time of any claim that American imperialism is motivated by concerns over "human rights." The war was instigated by the US and NATO powers through the relentless expansion of NATO eastwards, the 2014 coup in Ukraine, and other actions directed at Russia. As for the Ukrainians, US imperialism sees them as nothing more than cannon fodder.

There is no part of the world that is not ensnared in this expanding conflict. In particular, South Asia and the entire Indian Ocean region, including Sri Lanka, is being dragged into the US campaign to encircle China, which is seen by the American ruling class as its principal global rival.

In their support for genocide in Gaza, the US and NATO imperialist powers are declaring that nothing is off the table, including the use of nuclear weapons. Perhaps even more importantly, the homicidal violence is a warning to the working class: such methods will be used to suppress all opposition to the dictates of the ruling elite in every country.

The war is itself part of a broader series of intersecting crises. For nearly four years, the entire world has experienced a global pandemic that has killed more than 20 million people due to the refusal of world governments to adopt the necessary measures to save lives, because these measures get in the way of the accumulation of personal wealth and corporate profit. The level of social inequality is greater than at any point in modern history. The environment is being destroyed due to the subordination of human need to private profit.

The institutions of bourgeois democracy are rotten through and through. This coming year will be an election year in the United States. We are now just three years since the attempted fascistic coup led by Donald Trump, which had as its aim the overturning of the Constitution and the establishment of a dictatorship. The principal author of that attempted coup not only remains free, but he is the leading contender for the nomination of the Republican Party in the upcoming presidential elections. Far-right and fascistic individuals are on the rise internationally, from Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, to Javier Milei in Argentina, to Modi in India and Meloni in Italy.

But the promotion of these forces is part of a universal movement to the right of the entire political establishment, which is everywhere impervious to the interests of the vast majority of the population. In the US, it is the Biden administration that is organizing support for the genocide in Gaza and is spearheading the global eruption of imperialist violence.

The most significant factor in the present situation is the resurgence of working class struggle. The mass demonstrations against Israel's genocide are part of this. But they come in the context of a period that has seen mass demonstrations and strike activity throughout the world, from the largest strike wave in Britain in 40 years, to the mass protests of millions in France against pension cuts, to the protests here in Sri Lanka against IMF-backed austerity.

It is particularly important for workers and young people everywhere to have a sense of the depth of the social crisis and the level of social anger within the United States. American imperialism bestrides the globe and asserts its interests in every country, but at home it confronts a restive working class that can and will upend all the plans and designs of the ruling elite.

Through the media and in popular culture, the United States is presented as the land of unlimited opportunity. In reality, it is the most socially unequal advanced capitalist country in the world. One in 12 Americans don't have enough to eat. Half the population reports living "paycheck to paycheck." The number of people in poverty increased by 60 percent last year, from 25.6 million to 40.1 million. Trillions of dollars are allocated to war, while the most basic social programs are cut to the bone.

More than 600,000 workers in the US have participated in strikes this year, three times the level in 2022 and more than four times the level in 2021. The number of workdays lost to strikes is higher this year than at any point in several decades. This included strikes by over 60,000 film and television actors and writers as well the strike by autoworkers. So far this year, there have been 27 separate strikes by health care workers against intolerable conditions.

There is an enormous and pent-up anger in the working class, which is striving to break free from the control of a trade union apparatus that is doing everything it can to contain and suppress the class struggle.

Everywhere, workers and youth are confronted with a situation that raises the necessity for revolutionary solutions, on a global scale. We face not one or another problem in one or another country, this or that political figure. It is a universal experience—political personalities change, but the problems remain. One person is ousted, but his successor maintains the previous policy, even escalates it.

Masses of people are beginning to realize that what is at issue is the nature of the social system itself, of capitalism as a world economic system. However, this raises fundamental political questions. What is socialism and how is it to be accomplished? How are the forces necessary for the realization of this colossal task to be assembled and organized? Is the overthrow of capitalism even possible?

The answers to these questions require an understanding of the lessons and experiences of the 20th century, and the struggles that took place between political tendencies over fundamental issues of program and perspective, struggles that had a colossal impact on the course of events.

We are marking this year the 100th anniversary of the Trotskyist movement, first in the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union, initiated in 1923, and then in the Fourth International, founded 15 years later, in 1938. The founding of the Left Opposition by Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the Russian Revolution, marked the beginning of the most consequential political battle of the 20th century.

While the initial battles with the Stalinist apparatus in the Soviet Union took place in the final months of 1923, it was in the course of 1924 that the fundamental political issue came to the fore. This was the conflict between Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, the theory of world socialist revolution that animated the Russian Revolution itself, on the one hand, and the bureaucratic nationalist counter-revolution of the Stalinist apparatus, on the other.

Internationalism and nationalism, this was a fundamental issue that would reverberate throughout the 20th century. The usurpation by the Stalinist bureaucracy was connected fundamentally to an attack on the perspective of world socialist revolution in favor of "socialism in one country," a repudiation of basic Marxist theory advanced first by Bukharin and then by Stalin in 1924.

The impossibility of building socialism in one country had been an unquestioned premise of Marxism going back to the writings of Marx himself. Capitalism is a global system, and its replacement with a higher form of social organization can only take place on a world scale. In its

nationalist perspective, the Stalinist apparatus was defending the privileges of a bureaucratic caste that sought to make peace with imperialism by strangling the global movement of workers for socialism.

The central strategic principle that guided the struggle against Stalinism was formulated by Trotsky in his 1928 *Critique of the Draft Program of the Communist International*. “In our epoch, which is the epoch of imperialism, i.e., of world economy and world politics under the hegemony of finance capital,” Trotsky wrote, “not a single communist party can establish its program by proceeding solely or mainly from conditions and tendencies of developments in its own country... The revolutionary party of the proletariat can base itself only upon an international program corresponding to the character of the present epoch, the epoch of the highest development and collapse of capitalism.”

In this same document, Trotsky reviewed the central role of American imperialism. In words that speak with even greater power to the present situation, Trotsky declared: “In the period of crisis the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly, and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom. The United States will seek to overcome and extricate herself from her difficulties and maladies primarily at the expense of Europe, regardless of whether this occurs in Asia, Canada, South America, Australia, or Europe itself, or whether this takes place peacefully or through war.”

One might only add the caveat that a “peaceful” method for resolving the difficulties of American imperialism no longer exists.

The Stalinist bureaucracy, in its counter-revolutionary war against genuine socialism, waged a campaign of mass murder, including the murder of more than 800,000 socialist workers and intellectuals in the Great Terror of 1936–39. As Trotsky observed in 1937, this campaign drew “between Bolshevism and Stalinism not simply a bloody line but a whole river of blood.” Trotsky himself was assassinated by an agent of the GPU on August 20, 1940, and he died the next day.

This battle was to have profound consequences in every country, generally in the form of revolutionary movements that were betrayed and defeated due to the reactionary politics of the Stalinist Communist Parties, along with the Maoists, Castroists and bourgeois nationalists.

Here in Sri Lanka, the fight for Trotskyism emerged about a decade after the formation of the Left Opposition, first within the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which turned to Trotskyism in the late 1930s, and then in the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India, Ceylon and Burma (BLPI), formed in 1942 through a fusion of the LSSP with several organizations in India.

The BLPI intervened powerfully in the anti-imperialist movement, on the basis of a perspective for an all-India revolutionary struggle, uniting workers and oppressed masses of all languages, religions and ethnicities. It won a mass audience among workers, which was a major factor in compelling the British to move quickly to reach agreement with the bourgeois national organizations on nominal “independence” and partition.

The BLPI opposed the communal Partition of India and the constitution of Sri Lanka in 1948, which was quickly followed by the passage of laws stripping the vast majority of Tamil-speaking plantation workers of their basic rights as citizens. The Stalinists and bourgeois nationalists—including the Congress Party—collaborated in the partition of South Asia, which led to a fratricidal slaughter and the death of more than one million people.

At issue was the fight for the international unity of the working class against the promotion of national, linguistic and ethnic divisions. In a speech in August 1948, BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva attacked moves to disenfranchise Tamil workers, which were based on the assumption that “the state must be coeval with the nation and the nation with the race” as “an outmoded idea and an exploded philosophy.” He continued: “It is precisely under Fascism that the nation was to be made coeval with the race, and race the governing factor in the composition of the state...”

This powerful denunciation of a racial definition of the state was significant not only in relation to Sri Lanka. De Silva made these remarks only three months after the founding of Israel, in May 1948. The Zionist perspective that underlay the foundation of Israel was both hostile to the working class and the broad support among Jews for socialism, and oriented to imperialism. De Silva’s warnings in relation to Sri Lanka are now being realized by Israel in the fascistic genocide against the Palestinian people.

Another important anniversary is marked this year, seventy years since the Open Letter, published by American Trotskyist James P. Cannon, which established the programmatic basis for the International Committee of the Fourth International, which is the leadership of the socialist movement today.

The Open Letter was written in the years following the Second World War. After the imperialist slaughter of the two world wars, including the Nazi Holocaust that killed six million Jews, American capitalism was, with the help of the Stalinist, able to organize a temporary restabilization of world capitalism.

This restabilization created the conditions for various forms of national reformism, Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism to dominate and contain the struggles of workers and oppressed masses. It also found expression within the Fourth International in the form of a revisionist tendency, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, which goes by the name of Pabloism.

Pabloism repudiated every fundamental programmatic principle of Trotskyism. It rejected Trotsky’s insistence, stated in the opening sentence of the founding document of the Fourth International, that “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.” From this flowed an orientation to the Stalinist bureaucracy and its satellite regimes and parties throughout the world. Attributing to the state and party bureaucracies a revolutionary potential, the Pabloites sought the liquidation of the Fourth International as an independent political force.

Cannon’s Open Letter, to which I will return, was written in opposition to this perspective, and in defense of the basic principles, as well as the organizational existence, of the Trotskyist movement.

If the stand taken by the Trotskyists in the BLPI in 1948 represented a significant milestone, their political retreat (in what was fused and renamed the LSSP) set the stage for a catastrophic defeat for the working class of Sri Lanka. The LSSP rejected Cannon’s Open Letter and over the course of the next decade put Pablo’s perspective of “integrating” into the so-called mass movement in practice.

This culminated in the “Great Betrayal” of 1964, when amidst a massive working class offensive for sweeping social reforms, the LSSP entered a coalition government under Sri Lankan Freedom Party Prime Minister Bandaranaike. This was followed, in the early 1970s, by support for further attacks on the democratic rights of Tamil workers. The same individuals who had denounced the establishment of states based on race now lent their political authority to the promotion of Sinhala chauvinism.

Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya, in the last statement he wrote before his untimely death in December 1987, remarked, “There would never have been the fracturing of the national struggle of the Tamils and the class struggle of the Sri Lankan proletariat had it not been for the unspeakable betrayals carried out by the LSSP, sanctioned by the Pabloite revisionists, over the last quarter century.”

The LSSP’s betrayal set the stage for an explosion of Sinhalese chauvinism while also creating confusion for many Tamil workers, who had looked to the socialist-led working-class movement to defend their democratic rights. It set in train events that led to the three-decade long civil war, which killed hundreds of thousands of people, and was used to justify the wholesale gutting of the social and democratic rights of the working class, Sinhalese and Tamil alike.

The RCL [Revolutionary Communist League], predecessor of the

Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, was founded based on a struggle, led by the International Committee of the Fourth International [ICFI], to draw the real lessons of the Pabloite LSSP's betrayal of the program of socialist internationalism.

In the United States, the Socialist Workers Party was in the process of repudiating its previous struggle against Pabloism, of which the Open Letter was a high point. Part of this involved a cover-up of the political crimes of the LSSP. In 1964, supporters of the IC [International Committee] within the SWP were expelled after they issued an open letter demanding a discussion on the relationship between the Great Betrayal and Pabloism. Two years later, they founded the Workers League, predecessor of the SEP in the US.

Returning to the content of the Open Letter, written in 1953, Cannon concisely summarized the basic principles of the Trotskyist movement. The letter not only speaks to the situation confronting the working class at that time, but of our own time as well.

"The death agony of the capitalist system threatens the destruction of civilization through worsening depressions, world wars and barbaric manifestations like fascism," Cannon wrote. "The development of atomic weapons today underlines the danger in the gravest possible way. The descent into the abyss can be avoided only by replacing capitalism with the planned economy of socialism on a world scale and thus resuming the spiral of progress opened up by capitalism in its early days."

What is the situation that workers and youth throughout the world confront today? The US-NATO war against Russia has brought the world closer to nuclear war than at any point since the height of the Cold War. The genocide in Gaza is imperialism's "descent into the abyss." The revival of fascistic movements is the spearhead of a universal shift to the right of the entire political establishment and the turn to dictatorial and authoritarian methods of rule.

The alternative to capitalist barbarism is international socialism, the reorganization of economic life "*on a world scale*," as Cannon wrote, reiterating the basic perspective of Trotskyism and Marxism. The problems confronting workers and youth in every country are *world* problems, and they require international solutions.

The pandemic has certainly demonstrated that there are no national solutions to the basic problems we confront. Opposition to the policies of the ruling elite is not possible within the framework of one country. Here in Sri Lanka, the events of the past two years have shown that regardless of the composition of the government, it is the International Monetary Fund that dictates policies.

Cannon continued by stating that socialism "can be accomplished *only under the leadership of the working class* as the only truly revolutionary class in society. But the working class itself faces a crisis of leadership although the world relationship of social forces was never so favorable as today for the workers to take the road to power."

In the 70 years since the writing of the Open Letter, the international working class has grown enormously. Vast sections of the world that had previously been predominantly peasant-based have been proletarianized. For the first time in history, the majority of the world's population lives in urban areas, including gigantic mega-cities with populations of 10 million or more people.

The globalization of capitalist production has integrated the working class of the entire world to an extent previously unimaginable, and advances in communication have made it possible for workers in every country to coordinate their actions on a global scale. Global internet usage has increased from only 3 percent in 1996, to more than 65 percent today.

The eruption of the mass, international protests against the genocide in Gaza has confirmed the prognosis of the ICFI that the class struggle would develop as an international struggle, not only in content but also in form. The capitalist ruling elites have concentrated in their hands enormous, unprecedented wealth. They control governments and the

media. But the international working class is the most powerful force on the planet, the producers of everything.

The objective conditions create the basis for the development of a global movement of the working class for socialism. At the same time, however, as Cannon explained, workers confront "a crisis of revolutionary leadership." He wrote:

"The main obstacle to this is Stalinism, which attracts workers through exploiting the prestige of the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, only later, as it betrays their confidence, to hurl them either into the arms of the Social Democracy, into apathy, or back into illusions in capitalism..."

Comrade David North in a recent lecture in this series in London noted that the one major change between the present and the time of Cannon's Open Letter is that the Soviet Union and the mass Stalinist parties no longer exist. "But absolutely nothing remains of the false and politically disorienting identification of Stalinism with the heritage and program of the October Revolution," he noted.

Where outside of the Fourth International is there a program and perspective to lead the working class in the struggle for socialism? The Maoists, the Castroites, the various petit-bourgeois national movements have been swept from the scene or have been comprehensively exposed by developments. Their nationalist program did not correspond to the objective characteristics of the epoch.

The crisis of revolutionary leadership, however, remains to be resolved. There is and will be no shortage of mass, revolutionary upheavals. Workers are driven into struggle by objective developments.

The working class internationally confronts the treachery of the right-wing organizations that still call themselves Labor or Social Democratic Parties, the many pseudo-left and nationalist organizations—many of which trace their origins to the Pabloite repudiation of the program of the Fourth International. In the United States, as in other countries, the massive anger of workers is constrained by union bureaucracies that function as nothing more than agents of management and the state.

Cannon concluded his summary of the basic principles by stating that "the revolutionary situations opening up on every hand as Trotsky foresaw have only now brought full concreteness to what at one time may have appeared to be somewhat remote abstractions not intimately bound up with the living reality of the time. The truth is that these principles now hold with increasing force both in political analysis and in the determination of the course of practical action."

This conclusion applies with even greater force to the present situation. Throughout the world, masses of workers and youth are entering into struggle and are beginning to draw revolutionary conclusions. There is a growing understanding that a fundamental reorganization of society is necessary. No one believes the media and its propaganda. The bankruptcy of all political parties becomes evident.

The task facing workers in every country is the building of a genuine socialist movement in the working class, that will fight to take power from the criminal oligarchs and warmongers, the purveyors of genocide and their accomplices, and reorganize social and economic life, on a world scale, based on social equality. In accomplishing this task, workers and youth cannot escape history.

The present is formed and molded by the past, and it is on the basis of the experiences of the past that we will prove up to the challenge of meeting the problems of the present and building a socialist leadership to win the future.



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