Sri Lanka's fake-left FSP claims to be socialist while promoting pro-capitalist policies

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Speaking on May Day, Kumar Gunaratnam, the general secretary of the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) in Sri Lanka, declared that his party was "fighting for socialism." But the theme of the meeting—"Build a power outside [parliament], against the IMF [International Monetary Fund] death trap and Indian colonisation!"—revealed the opposite.

While denouncing the IMF's drastic austerity agenda being implemented by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led government, the FSP is promoting the illusion that pressure from outside parliament will force it to implement policies to alleviate the huge social crisis facing working people. At the same time, the FSP is whipping up anti-Indian chauvinism by opposing economic and military deals with India.

Gunaratnam's reference to "socialism" is just so much holiday speechifying—talking about the struggle for socialism, while engaging day-to-day in futile protest politics and hobnobbing with capitalist parties.

The FSP general secretary told his audience that the party understood the right-wing direction of the JVP/NPP government and opposed its policies from the outset. But the people still have illusions about the government, he said.

He was lying through his teeth. If the party knew what the JVP and its electoral front, the National People's Power (NPP), was going to do, why didn't Gunaratnam tell working people the truth from the outset and counter their illusions?

After JVP leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake won the presidential election last year, Gunaratnam held a press conference on September 24 and hailed the result as an "expression of people's expectations." The FSP pushed the illusion that the JVP's victory was "progressive," joining with the deluge of commentary in Sri Lanka and internationally proclaiming the JVP as "leftist" and even "Marxist."

When the JVP/NPP rapidly ditched its promise to renegotiate terms with the IMF and began implementing its harsh austerity agenda, the FSP leaders "opposed" the measures, but added that they were ready to "protect" the government from the defeated and corrupt traditional bourgeois political parties.

In the wake of the May 6 local elections, in which it won 15 seats on various local councils, the FSP is putting this political line into practice. Speaking recently on Hiru TV's "Balaya" talk show, FSP leader Pubudu Jayagoda declared that his party would support the JVP/NPP to establish its control over local councils where necessary.

The FSP's treacherous role in the 2022 popular uprising

In his May Day speech, Gunaratnam declared: "We can change the present situation only by continuing the 2022 struggle that has been stopped." He said the mass movement had faced repression and obstacles and had turned to parliamentary manoeuvres. He repeated the call for a "power outside" parliament to continue this struggle.

Gunaratnam's comments are a deceitful cover-up of the FSP's role in the April–July 2022 popular uprising: politically disarming workers and youth, and steering them into the dead-end of parliamentary manoeuvres. Millions took to the streets in protests and strikes after Sri Lanka was forced to default on foreign debts amid an acute foreign exchange crisis, creating huge price rises, shortages of fuel, food and medicines and frequent electrical blackouts.

The ruling class was desperate to bring this mass movement under control after workers and youth defied attempts by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to impose emergency rule and use the military to suppress opposition. Rajapakse was finally forced to flee the country and resign.

Far from opposing the parliamentary manoeuvres of the bourgeois opposition parties—the JVP/NPP and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB)—the FSP played the critical role in diverting the mass struggle into the blind alley of parliament.

Alongside the trade union bureaucracies, the FSP took the initiative in proposing the formation of an interim capitalist government by the JVP/NPP and SJB. "The realistic solution," it declared, "is that all opposition parties in the parliament establish an interim administration" to work with the protest groups outside parliament. "Then an election should be held soon." [*The Struggle that Shook the Mansion*, FSP publication, page 241]

In other words, the FSP's entire perspective was based on subordinating the masses on the streets to the manoeuvres in parliament for an "interim government" and elections. The result was the installation of the notorious pro-IMF, pro-US figure Ranil Wickremesinghe, who had no popular support but had the backing of the corporate elite. With the agreement of the JVP/NPP and SJB, he promptly negotiated a $3 billion IMF bailout loan, began implementing its austerity demands and mobilised the police and military to suppress opposition.

There was a political alternative to the FSP's treachery. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fought for the mobilisation of the working class, independent of all parties of the capitalist class and their trade union apparatuses. We called for the formation of independent action committees of workers in every workplace and neighbourhood and also by the rural masses, as the means of fighting for their class interests.

The SEP called for the repudiation of all foreign debts and the allocation of funds to end the social distress facing millions. In opposition to Rajapakse's emergency decrees, we called for the immediate abolition of the autocratic executive presidency.

While the FSP collaborated with the parliamentary opposition, the SEP

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advanced the call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on delegates from the action committees, to discuss, formulate and implement a strategy to defend the democratic and social rights of working people. We openly stated this had to involve the struggle to establish a workers' and peasants' government to carry out socialist policies.

The FSP's pro-capitalist program

Three years on, the FSP continues to function as a satellite of the Colombo political establishment. In his May Day speech, Gunaratnam condemned the JVP-led government for implementing IMF austerity measures "even better than" Wickremesinghe. He attacked it for increasing taxes on working people and not taxing the rich.

The FSP leader declared that "socialism" was the means to the "defeat the IMF death trap," but elaborated no socialist policies for the working class. In reality, the record shows that the FSP operates entirely within the framework of capitalism and completely accepts the domination of international finance capital.

Last October, the FSP Central Committee sent a letter to President Dissanayake advising him on how to conduct negotiations with the IMF on debt restructuring. The responsibility of the JVP/NPP government, it declared, was "to present an Alternative Debt Sustainability plan" that would end the IMF's "unfavourable" conditions. This, it said, "will be a progressive and historic approach to saving the people from the US-IMF agenda…"

In sending the letter, the FSP abandoned its own fanciful "Exit IMF Strategy." It proposed forming a debtors' collective consisting of various "lefts," intellectuals and the international network known as the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt, to analyse Sri Lanka's debts. It wanted to "exit the IMF" to negotiate a better deal directly with the same international creditors that were backing the IMF agenda!

The Dissanayake government's total capitulation to the IMF demonstrated that the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie—or, for that matter, the ruling class in any debtor country—is in no position to bargain with international finance capital. Both FSP proposals—to renegotiate terms with the IMF, or alternatively, directly with Sri Lanka's creditors—were utopian fantasies.

There was nothing remotely socialist about the FSP's schemes. Socialists do not advise capitalist governments in their negotiations with the IMF or international creditors. Genuine socialists seek to clarify and independently mobilise workers to end the domination of global finance capital, by overthrowing capitalism in a joint struggle with workers internationally based on a socialist perspective.

That is precisely what the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has fought to do in the elections over the past year and in its campaigns daily in the working class. We demand the complete repudiation of all foreign debts and the reallocation of funds to meet the pressing social needs of the masses. Workers and the poor are not responsible for the huge loans raised to pay for the country's devastating 26-year communal war or to give handouts to boost foreign and local investors.

The FSP's origins

The FSP was formed in 2012 by a group of former JVP members led by Gunaratnam. The JVP itself was established in the 1960s by appealing to disenchanted rural youth on the basis of Sinhala chauvinism and petty-bourgeois radicalism. Far from being based on Marxism, the JVP was hostile to the working class. Its ideological foundations were rooted in Maoist and Castroite peasant guerillaism.

Like many similar groups internationally based on the "armed struggle," the JVP in the 1990s, in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the turn to capitalist restoration, exchanged its weapons for a place in the Colombo political establishment. It largely dropped its phoney socialist and anti-imperialist rhetoric.

As loyal JVP members, the Gunaratnam-led group faithfully followed its policies, including full support for the brutal anti-Tamil communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that erupted in 1983 and its open backing for capitalist governments since 1994.

The FSP founders claimed to have broken from the JVP because of what they describe as "political mistakes." In reality, the JVP was nakedly functioning as a parliamentary capitalist party with ambitions to take power, most graphically demonstrated by its decision to join the capitalist coalition government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga in 2004. Four JVP leaders became ministers, including Dissanayake, who as agriculture minister imposed the government's pro-market policies on peasants.

The FSP, in its 2012 publication "Self Critically Looking Back at the Party," also cites the JVP's December 2005 agreement to assist Mahinda Rajapakse to become president in order to restart the reactionary civil war against the LTTE. Rajapakse ruthlessly waged the war, which finally culminated in the LTTE's defeat in 2009 with the slaughter of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians. In 2010, the JVP formed a front with the right-wing United National Party to back the presidential bid of General Sarath Fonseka, who had led the final bloody offensives against the LTTE.

These afterthoughts of the FSP leaders on the JVP's "political mistakes," were simply intended to justify and camouflage their support for the JVP's crimes against the working class and its actions in propping up capitalist rule.

The FSP's split from the JVP was not motivated by political principle, but the sharp decline in support for the JVP among working people and particularly youth. In the 2010 parliamentary election, which it contested in alliance with Fonseka and the UNP, it retained just 4 of its previous 39 seats. Disappointment reigned in its ranks. Two years later, the Gunaratnam group left the party, along with a large portion of its student organisation, to form the FSP.

The FSP split from the JVP but did not break from its reactionary communal and pro-capitalist politics. It remains rooted in the JVP's reactionary nationalism and Sinhala chauvinism and intransigently opposed to the Marxist perspective of socialist internationalism.

The FSP's anti-Indian chauvinism

In his May Day speech, Gunaratnam declared that the FSP was the genuine representative of the JVP's foul political heritage and accused the JVP leaders of betraying it.

Central to his speech was an attack on the defence and economic agreements signed on April 5 by President Dissanayake with visiting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He denounced Dissanayake and the JVP for carrying out a "great betrayal" of those who "sacrificed their lives" in the 1971 April Rebellion and the 1988–1990 campaign against India's hegemonic designs.

Gunaratnam declared that the JVP's armed uprisings in 1971 and 1988–1990 were "struggles for socialism" and pledged that the FSP

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would continue those traditions. The JVP, he said, had from its inception opposed "Indian expansionism." He repeated the JVP's anti-Tamil slander that estate workers of Indian origin were being manipulated by New Delhi for its advantage.

In its early years, one of the JVP's regular series of five classes was devoted to indoctrinating cadre on "Indian expansionism." It declared that Tamil-speaking estate workers were a privileged social layer in Sri Lanka and functioned as a "fifth column" of India. This was nothing but a filthy chauvinist attack on the hundreds of thousands of impoverished estate workers, aimed at dividing the working class along communal lines.

Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP's predecessor, in his 1970 series of articles, *The Politics and Class Nature of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna,* brilliantly exposed the JVP's anti-working class and chauvinist character. He correctly warned that the JVP could evolve into "a naked tool of monopoly capital" and "a force hostile to the working class which a future fascist movement could use."

The JVP rebellion in April 1971 was an adventurist uprising, completely isolated from the working class, against the capitalist coalition government of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Lanka Sama Samaja Party and Stalinist Communist Party. This government, which the JVP had supported in the 1970 election, mobilised the military to ruthlessly crush the rebellion, killing at least 15,000 rural youth and jailing thousands more, including JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera.

While opposing the JVP's politics, the RCL conducted a principled campaign against the repression and for the release of all political prisoners, as part of its own political struggle for the independent mobilisation of the working class against the coalition government.

Balasuriya's warnings about the JVP's rightward evolution were borne out in its patriotic campaign in 1988–1990 against the Indo-Lanka Accord. Colombo signed the Accord with New Delhi in July 1987, amid a huge crisis stemming from its anti-Tamil civil war. Under the agreement, so-called Indian peacekeeping troops entered the north and east of Sri Lanka to disarm the LTTE and some concessions were granted to the Tamil elite.

The JVP denounced the Accord as a betrayal of the "Motherland" and called for anti-Accord protests and riots. It formed the "Movement for Protection of Motherland" with several openly Sinhala-racist groups and established the "Patriotic National Movement" as a military wing.

JVP gunmen carried out fascistic attacks on workers, political opponents and young people who opposed its patriotic campaign, killing at least 6,000. Among those murdered were three RCL members: R.A. Pitawela, a teacher, in November 1988; P.H. Gunapala, a worker at Peradeniya University; and Greshan Geekiyanage, a youth, in August 1989.

The RCL opposed the reactionary Indo-Lanka Accord, not to "defend the Motherland," but rather to unite workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—in the struggle for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a Socialist Federation of South Asia and internationally.

FSP leader Gunaratnam not only hails its fascistic campaign as "a struggle for socialism," but openly boasts of his role in it. He told his audience that, as JVP youth leader, he joined in the JVP's fight against Indian troops by carrying out an attack on an Indian sentry post in the eastern port city of Trincomalee.

The JVP carried out its reactionary campaign in league with the UNP government of President R. Premadasa, with whom JVP leader Wijeweera held secret talks in 1989. Ultimately, however, Premadasa turned on the JVP, not out of fear of the Wijeweera leadership, but because he distrusted the JVP's ability to control its rural base. Premadasa unleashed the military and its death squads, murdering JVP leaders, including Wijeweera, and slaughtering at least 60,000 rural youth.

Gunaratnam's pledge that the FSP uphold all the JVP's reactionary traditions is a sharp warning to workers and youth that it too will stop at nothing to defend the unitary bourgeois nation state of Sri Lanka amid the current deep crisis of global capitalism.

The FSP's foreign policy: Non-alignment

Gunaratnam's May Day speech tried to dress up his nationalist, anti-Indian diatribe with anti-imperialist phrases. He pointed out that America is seeking global hegemony and targeting China, and that India had joined the US in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue with Japan and Australia. "We should have a non-aligned policy," he said. "Is it good to have a defence agreement with India?"

Non-alignment, however, is not an anti-war nor an anti-imperialist program. The Non-Aligned Movement begun in the 1960s was an attempt by countries such as Indonesia and India to manoeuvre between US imperialism and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It was shattered by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, leading to the open alignment of many of its members with the US.

Appeals for "non-alignment" today are an exercise in futility, as the US demands countries, large and small, take sides against China amid a vast US military build-up for war in Asia. Along with pacifist appeals for disarmament, "non-alignment" serves only to divert workers and youth into impotent protest movements, but not to prevent the war.

While he lashes out at India, Gunaratnam is virtually silent on Trump's predatory aims, including his openly stated intentions of seizing Greenland and the Panama Canal, and incorporating Canada as the 51st American state. He attacks the defence agreement with India, which is undoubtedly reactionary, but has nothing to say about Sri Lanka's Access and Cross Service Agreement (ACSA) with the US and its growing integration into Washington's war plans.

The FSP is organically incapable of advancing a genuine anti-war program because it is rooted in nationalism. None of the huge problems and dangers facing working people can be resolved within the framework of the nation state, including the mounting threat of world war.

The wars already underway and the danger of nuclear conflagration can only be halted by the abolition of capitalism. That is only possible through the building of a unified anti-war movement of the international working class based on socialist internationalism, for which only the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the Socialist Equality Parties fight.

The cutting edge of the fight for socialism is internationalism against all forms of national opportunism. That was central to the struggle that was waged by all the great representatives of Marxism—Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. The ICFI represents the continuity of the political struggle waged by Trotsky against Stalinism and its nationalist perspective of Socialism in One Country.

The FSP's claims to be socialist are false to the core. It is not based on the working class, but represents well-off layers of the upper middle-class that want to improve their lot under capitalism, not overthrow it. Its perspective is that of class collaboration and compromise, not the class struggle. Its nationalism and class orientation derive from the JVP's origins in Castroism and Maoism, the Chinese variant of Stalinism, which is the antithesis of Marxism and socialist internationalism.

We urge workers and young people to carefully study our history and program and apply to join and build the SEP as the necessary revolutionary leadership for the huge class struggles that lie ahead.

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