

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 1

By the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The World Socialist Web Site is publishing The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) which was adopted unanimously at the party's founding congress in Colombo, 27–29 May, 2011. It will be posted in 12 parts.

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1. Introduction

1-1. The Socialist Equality Party is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of socialist revolution founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938. The ICFI represents the continuation of the political and theoretical struggles waged by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky for the political independence of the working class. It is the only political party seeking to mobilise, educate and unite workers internationally for the overthrow of the outmoded capitalist system and the reconstruction of society on a socialist basis.

1-2. The onset of the greatest economic breakdown since the Great Depression of the 1930s, which began with the global financial crash in 2008, signifies that capitalism has entered into a new period of systemic crisis. In every country, the ruling class seeks to shore up its position by undermining its international rivals, on the one hand, and by imposing new burdens on the working class, on the other. The former is greatly exacerbating global tensions, conflicts and the drive to war, while the latter is fuelling the class struggle and opening up a new period of revolutionary upheavals.

1-3. The global crisis is centred in the heart of world capitalism—the United States. The advanced decay of American capitalism and the rise of new powers in Asia—especially China—have dramatically sharpened inter-imperialist rivalries. The reckless attempts by the US to offset its economic decline through the use of military force have already produced a series of wars, including the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, aimed at establishing an American stranglehold over the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. These conflicts arise out of the fundamental contradictions of the profit system—between the world economy and the outmoded nation-state system and between socialised production and private ownership of the means of production. The globalisation of production has raised these contradictions to a new pitch of intensity.

1-4. The rise of China, and to a lesser extent India, over the past two decades has dramatically shifted the centre of gravity of world politics towards Asia. China has risen from the world's 10th largest economy in 1990 to overtake Japan in 2010 and become the second largest after the US. China's burgeoning industries compel it to import vast quantities of raw materials, including oil and gas from the Middle East and Africa. China is building a blue-water navy to secure its shipping lanes, bringing

it into competition in the Indian Ocean with Japan, India and above all, the US. Every corner of Asia, including Sri Lanka, is caught up in this rivalry that is leading inexorably to a catastrophic conflict. Unlike the first two world wars that focussed on the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, a new conflagration is likely to be centred in the Indian Ocean.

1-5. Asia is destined to become a vast arena not only of inter-imperialist rivalries but also of the social revolution. Economic expansion has created huge new battalions of the working class. China alone has an urban workforce of 400 million. Moreover, the social gulf between rich and poor has widened in every country. China, which has the second largest number of billionaires in the world, also has at least 250 million people living below the poverty line. In India, obscene wealth exists alongside the world's greatest concentration of poverty. None of these immense social contradictions can be resolved on the basis of capitalism. The sharp deterioration of living standards since 2008, as governments imposed the costs of the crisis on working people, has already propelled millions into struggle in Europe and in Tunisia, Egypt and the Middle East. It will drive workers throughout Asia and internationally to fight for decent living standards and democratic rights and against militarism and war. These struggles must be integrated into a global counteroffensive by the working class to abolish the bankrupt profit system and its outmoded nation-state system and replace it with a world-planned socialist economy.

1-6. The bitter lesson of the twentieth century, however, is that the working class cannot spontaneously take power. That requires the building of revolutionary leaderships based on an assimilation of all of the critical historical experiences of the working class. The International Committee of the Fourth International is the embodiment of the lessons derived from the protracted struggle of Trotskyism against Stalinism and all forms of opportunism. That rich legacy is summed up in *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party* adopted by the SEP (United States), which also constitutes the basis of the political work of the SEP in Sri Lanka.

2. The Theory of Permanent Revolution

2-1. Central to a scientific, that is a Marxist, revolutionary perspective is Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution—an integrated conception of world socialist revolution that encompasses the backward colonial and semi-colonial countries as well as the advanced ones. First formulated in the wake of the 1905 revolution in Russia, the Theory of Permanent Revolution was developed in opposition to the two-stage perspective of the Menshevik faction of Russian Social Democracy. The Mensheviks held that Russia must first undergo a prolonged period of capitalist development before the socialist revolution was possible. They concluded therefore that the proletariat had to ally itself with the liberal bourgeoisie in carrying out the basic tasks of the democratic

revolution—the destruction of the Czarist autocracy and the radical transformation of land relations in rural areas.

2-2. Trotsky, along with Lenin, demonstrated the organic incapacity of the Russian bourgeoisie—dependent on international finance capital, tied to the rural landlords and fearful of the emerging working class—to carry out the democratic tasks. Trotsky and Lenin both foresaw that the natural ally of the proletariat against the Czarist autocracy was the multi-millioned peasantry. But Lenin's formula of a "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry", while imparting a particularly radical character to the democratic revolution, left unresolved the political relationship between the two classes. Notwithstanding the daring nature of his conceptions, Lenin did not regard the democratic dictatorship as the instrument for the socialist reorganisation of society, but rather as the means for giving the fullest scope to the development of capitalism.

2-3. Trotsky's conclusions went further. On the basis of an examination of the entire historical record, he insisted that the peasantry was unable to play any independent revolutionary role. Given the inability of the bourgeoisie to resolve the democratic tasks, it fell to the proletariat at the head of the insurgent masses to carry out the bourgeois democratic revolution through the establishment of "a dictatorship of the proletariat that leads the peasant masses behind it." The essential ingredient was a vigorous and consistent struggle by the revolutionary party for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie. Having seized power, however, the proletariat would of necessity be compelled to carry out the revolutionary tasks through its own class methods, and would inevitably make deep inroads into the private ownership of the means of production. In other words, it would be forced to begin the reorganisation of society on socialist lines, and in doing so link its fate to the European and world socialist revolution.

2-4. Trotsky's theory of the class dynamics of the Russian Revolution flowed from his conception of the world socialist revolution as an integrated, though not simultaneous, process. The social revolution in Russia could not be confined to one country, but, would be compelled for its survival to extend onto the international stage. "The conquest of power by the proletariat does not complete the revolution, but only opens it. Socialist construction is conceivable only on the foundation of the class struggle, on a national and international scale. This struggle, under conditions of an overwhelming predominance of capitalist relationships on the world arena, must inevitably lead to explosions, that is, internally to civil wars and externally to revolutionary wars. Therein lies the permanent character of the socialist revolution as such, regardless of whether it is a backward country that is involved, which only yesterday accomplished its democratic revolution, or an old capitalist country, which already has behind it a long epoch of democracy and parliamentarism." [1]

2-5. The revolutionary events of 1917 in Russia verified Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution in all its essentials. On his return from exile in April 1917, Lenin took sharp issue with the Bolshevik leaders, including Stalin, who were giving critical support to the bourgeois Provisional Government which had formed after the overthrow of the Czar in February. In his April Theses, Lenin broke from his formula of the democratic dictatorship and in practice adopted the standpoint of Permanent Revolution. He called for the working class to oppose the Provisional Government and to take power through the workers' councils, or Soviets, that emerged with the fall of the Czar. Lenin's reorientation of the Bolshevik Party laid the basis for the October Revolution of 1917 and the establishment of a Soviet government, which gave a mighty impetus to the processes of world socialist revolution.

2-6. The Chinese Revolution of 1925–27 also confirmed the farsightedness of the Theory of Permanent Revolution in countries of belated capitalist development, albeit tragically and in the negative. The

defeat of the Chinese Revolution was above all the responsibility of the Soviet bureaucracy headed by Stalin, which had arisen in conditions of the continued isolation and backwardness of the Soviet Union, and usurped power from the working class. Under the banner of "Socialism in One Country", the Stalinist bureaucracy increasingly transformed the Third International from the organising centre of the world socialist revolution into a pliant tool of Soviet foreign policy and used the communist parties to manoeuvre with bourgeois parties and governments. In China, Stalin revived the Menshevik two-stage theory, insisting that imperialist oppression compelled the national bourgeoisie to play a revolutionary role. His subordination of the young Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT), which he hailed as the vanguard of the Chinese Revolution, resulted in crushing defeats for the revolutionary movement—first in Shanghai in April 1927 at the hands of KMT leader Chiang Kai-shek, and then in Wuhan by the "left" KMT government in July 1927.

2-7. Trotsky and the Left Opposition, formed in 1923 to politically combat the Stalinist bureaucracy, subjected Stalin's policies to a withering critique and in doing so enriched the Theory of Permanent Revolution. Trotsky, who had strenuously fought for the political independence of the CCP from the KMT, explained that imperialism did not weld the national bourgeoisie together with the proletariat, the peasantry and intelligentsia into a revolutionary "bloc of four classes" as Stalin claimed. Trotsky wrote: "[E]verything that brings the oppressed and exploited masses of the toilers to their feet inevitably pushes the national bourgeoisie into an open bloc with the imperialists. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened, but, on the contrary, it is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every point." [2] As the revolutionary tide ebbed in 1927, Stalin criminally ordered the mutilated CCP in Canton and other cities to improvise insurrections that were doomed to defeat. The Canton Commune was timed to coincide with the Fifteenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—to demonstrate Stalin's "revolutionary" credentials as he expelled the Left Opposition en masse and sent Trotsky into exile.

2-8. In the course of the twentieth century, the subordination of the working class to the so-called "progressive" bourgeoisie under the banner of the "two-stage theory" and the "bloc of four classes" has invariably ended in disastrous defeat. At the same time, the Stalinists and their apologists have waged a relentless campaign of vilification against Trotskyism in general and the Theory of Permanent Revolution in particular. However, Trotsky's astonishing theoretical insights more than a century ago remain the essential guide for workers and youth seeking a revolutionary road forward. Nowhere has the struggle for the Theory of Permanent Revolution been more thoroughly fought out than in Sri Lanka. The rich strategic experiences of the struggle for Trotskyism on this small island, embodied in the SEP, provide vital lessons for the building of mass revolutionary parties throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America and around the world.

3. The formation of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party

3-1. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) was founded in December 1935 by members of the Youth Leagues in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) which had opposed the limited constitutional reform of 1931 that provided for an elected State Council to advise the British colonial administration. Inspired by the mass independence movement in India, the Youth Leagues not only demanded an end to British rule, but, amid the social distress caused by the Great Depression, turned towards socialism.

3-2. The Youth Leagues had struck roots among workers and the rural poor. They challenged the control of A.E. Goonesinha over the trade union movement in Colombo, most effectively in the 1933 strike at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills. Goonesinha had led significant

union struggles in the 1920s, but in the 1930s, under conditions of mass unemployment, functioned as a strike breaker and purveyor of anti-immigrant and anti-Tamil racism. In 1934, the Youth Leagues launched a broad campaign to assist the victims of a malaria epidemic, which, compounded by the malnutrition caused by falling incomes and poor harvests, caused at least 100,000 deaths.

3-3. From the outset, the LSSP contained diverse elements. Its formation took place against the backdrop of mounting reaction centred in Europe. Hitler had come to power in 1933 in Germany as a result of the criminal policies of Stalin and the Third International whose ultra-left “Third Period” line, adopted in 1928, split and paralysed the German working class. In opposition to the Stalinist policy of denouncing the Social Democratic Party (SPD) as “social fascists”, Trotsky had fought for a united front of the German Communist Party and the SPD. The tactic of the united front was based on unity in action around concrete objectives, without any mixing of political programs, slogans or banners. Its purpose was to mobilise the strength of the working class against the Nazis and their storm troopers, while exposing the perfidy of the Social Democratic leadership. After the coming to power of the Nazis failed to provoke any criticism of Stalin’s policies within the Third International, Trotsky concluded that the working class must turn to the building of a new international—the Fourth International.

3-4. Prominent in the LSSP leadership was a layer of brilliant young people who had studied in America and Britain. Amid the intellectual ferment produced by the political upheavals in Europe and internationally, they were strongly influenced by Trotsky’s writings. The foremost among these was Philip Gunawardena, who studied in America before moving to Britain in 1928. He joined the British Communist Party but was expelled after criticising Stalin’s policies in India and China. Those who were part of his circle included Colvin R. de Silva, Leslie Goonewardene, N.M. Perera and Vernon Gunasekera.

3-5. The LSSP, however, also included Stalinist sympathisers and radical bourgeois nationalists. This mixed membership was reflected in the party’s amorphous program. Its manifesto declared that the party’s fundamental aim was the establishment of a socialist society through “the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange of commodities.” It called for “the attainment of national independence” and “the abolition of economic and political inequality and oppression arising from differences of class, race, caste, creed and sex.” But the program did not identify the LSSP as a party of the working class nor did it elaborate a revolutionary program for achieving socialism. It made no attempt to address any of the issues confronting the international working class, above all, the emergence of Stalinism and its betrayals.

3-6. The emergence of the LSSP as a radical, anti-colonial party oriented to the toilers was a product of the economic backwardness of the Sri Lankan capitalist class and its political servility to British colonial rule. Even compared to the local capitalists in India who were prominent in the textile, jute, coal and steel industries, their counterparts in Sri Lanka played a minor economic role. The tea plantations—the dominant and most profitable industry—were British-owned. The main transport infrastructure—the docks and railways—had been built by British capital. The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie filled the less profitable gaps in the colonial economy—accumulating capital through their employment as servants of the colonial state, the farming of liquor rents, and their ownership of rubber and coconut estates and graphite mines.

3-7. Politics followed economics. The Ceylon National Congress (CNC) formed in 1919 was a pale reflection of the Indian National Congress (INC) established by the Indian bourgeoisie in 1885. Whereas the INC called for self-government as early as 1907 and in the aftermath of World War I launched mass campaigns for self-rule, the CNC was capable only of the most timid appeals for constitutional change. The CNC had far more in common with the backward-looking communal organisations of

India—the Muslim League founded in 1907 and the All India Hindu Mahasabha in 1915—that, insofar as they opposed British rule at all, did so from the standpoint of preserving the privileges of the traditional Muslim and Hindu elites. In Sri Lanka, the CNC rested on the Buddhist revivalism of the Sinhala elites who were hostile to the island’s Tamil and Muslim minorities. The CNC split on communal lines in 1921 when the leadership refused to accede to the demands of its president, prominent Tamil leader Ponnambalam Arunachalam, over Tamil representation. The organisations of the Tamil and Muslim elites in Sri Lanka distinguished themselves from the CNC only by their even greater subservience to British rule.

3-8. The abiding fear of all sections of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie was the emergence of a powerful, combative working class. The proletariat was concentrated in the tea plantations to which Tamil-speaking workers had been brought from southern India as indentured labour. By 1921, plantation workers and their families numbered around 500,000 out of the island’s total population of 4.5 million. An urban proletariat also developed in Colombo especially in the docks, railway workshops and emerging industries. In India, the INC under Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi sought in a limited and tightly-controlled manner to appeal to the anti-colonial sentiment and socio-economic grievances of the masses, so as to pressure the British for concessions. In Sri Lanka, the CNC did not call for independence from British rule and waged no public campaigns for either political or social reforms. Its organic hostility to the masses was reflected in its fierce opposition to the introduction of universal suffrage on the recommendation of the British government’s Donoughmore Commission as part of the 1931 constitutional reform.

3-9. Thus, in the 1930s, as layers of the intelligentsia were radicalised by the oppressive conditions in Sri Lanka, the political upheavals in Europe and the growing danger of war, their views found no outlet within the Colombo political establishment. Unlike India, no Communist Party had formed in Sri Lanka. The only party based on the working class was the Labour Party formed in 1928 by the Colombo trade union boss Goonesinha under the tutelage of the British Labour Party. It did not support independence or advocate socialism and was deeply hostile to Marxism. The LSSP thus became the political home for various tendencies—those who were drawn towards Trotskyism, as well as militant bourgeois nationalists and reformers for whom a socialistic or even Marxist colouration was a necessary means of approaching the masses.

3-10. It was a measure of the extreme class tensions at the time in Sri Lanka and internationally that those who were thrust into the LSSP leadership were the most audacious and revolutionary elements oriented to the working class—the so-called Trotskyist-group or T-group. Colvin R. de Silva became the LSSP’s first president and Leslie Goonewardene its first secretary. Philip Gunawardena and N.M. Perera were elected to the State Council in February 1936 and used their position to emphatically declare the LSSP’s opposition to any support for Britain in the looming world war. The LSSP gained support in the Colombo working class through its determined defence of basic rights and conditions in the teeth of violent opposition by Goonesinha and his union apparatus. The failure of bourgeois parties to advocate, let alone fight for, even limited social reforms or democratic rights, including freedom from colonial rule, meant that those tasks fell to the emerging representatives of the proletariat. The LSSP campaigned for and won a series of partial reforms, including changes to the oppressive village headman system, the use of local languages in the courts and unemployment relief.

3-11. In 1937, the LSSP sponsored a tour by prominent Congress Socialist Party leader Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya from India, who addressed a rally of 35,000 people at Galle Face Green in Colombo. A young Australian, Mark Bracegirdle, a planter’s apprentice who had joined the LSSP, spoke alongside her in the plantation areas, denouncing the exploitation of tea estate workers. The colonial administration’s

attempt to deport Bracegirdle turned into a David and Goliath confrontation with the LSSP that electrified the island. In the face of overwhelming public opposition, a censure of the governor in the State Council and a Supreme Court order against the deportation, the colonial authorities were compelled to retreat, greatly enhancing the LSSP's political stature.

3-12. However, the most fundamental issues facing the LSSP were bound up with international events. From its founding in 1935, the LSSP had taken no public stand on the life-and-death political struggle being waged by Trotsky and his co-thinkers against Stalinism and for the building of the Fourth International. Its only international affiliation was with the Congress Socialist Party in India, formed in 1934 as a loose socialistic faction within the INC. However, between 1935 and 1939, the LSSP leadership was increasingly driven into conflict with the Stalinist Third International and was compelled to grapple with the decisive international issues of the period. The so-called T-group was deeply disturbed by the Popular Front politics advocated by Stalin that resulted in devastating defeats in the 1930s of the semi-insurrectionary French strike movement and the Spanish revolution. The "Popular Front" was the diametrical opposite of the United Front that Trotsky had advocated in Germany. In the name of the fight against fascism and the defence of democracy, it involved a common political platform with opportunist and openly bourgeois parties that shackled the working class to the bourgeoisie, private property and the state, and blocked its independent revolutionary activity. As part of the Popular Front policy and its manoeuvres with the "democratic" powers of France and Britain, the Stalinist bureaucracy abandoned the Third International's previous support for full independence for the colonies of those countries; and, in doing so, betrayed the developing anti-colonial revolution.

3-13. Privately the LSSP leadership was hostile to the monstrous Moscow Show Trials of 1936–1938 that were targeted at the Trotskyist movement but also served as the pretext for the systematic murder of hundreds of thousands of socialists, including Bolshevik leaders, Red Army commanders, scientists and artists—the finest representatives of the generation that had carried out the Russian Revolution. The LSSP leaders were also strongly influenced by Trotsky's profound analysis of Stalinism in *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It Going?*, which first became available in English in 1938. It was, however, the outbreak of World War II that proved decisive in the LSSP's turn to Trotskyism and the establishment of a section of the Fourth International in India and Sri Lanka.

To be continued

Footnotes:

1. Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution* (London: New Park Publications, 1971) pp. 154–55.

2. Leon Trotsky, "The Chinese Revolution and the Theses of Comrade Stalin" in *Leon Trotsky on China* (New York: Monad Press, 1976) p. 161.

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