

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)—Part 5

the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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11. The liquidation of the BLPI

11-1. The waning of the post-war revolutionary movements and the granting of formal independence to Britain's South Asian colonies generated enormous political pressures on the BLPI to adapt to the new national framework and state structures. For layers of the middle classes, "independence" opened up opportunities in the political sphere of parliament and careers in the expanding state bureaucracy and state-owned corporations. The stabilisation of global capitalism and the post-war boom led to rising prices for export commodities and enabled the bourgeoisie in the former colonies to make concessions, albeit of a limited character, to the working class. This was especially true in Sri Lanka where a weak capitalist class confronted a militant proletariat, sections of which were under the BLPI's revolutionary leadership. Temporary economic gains fostered reformist illusions that a socialist revolution was not necessary and that the lot of workers could be improved piecemeal through a combination of parliamentary manoeuvre and militant trade union action.

11-2. Central to the BLPI's liquidation between 1948 and 1950 was its retreat into nationalism. The opening section of the BLPI's "Program for Ceylon" published in 1946 had argued powerfully that the socialist revolution in Ceylon and India were intimately entwined. "Even at its highest point of mobilisation, the revolutionary mass movement in this island alone could not, unassisted from outside, generate the energies required to overcome the forces which the imperialists would muster in defence of their power in Ceylon, which is for them not only a field of economic exploitation, but a strategic outpost for the defence of the Empire as a whole ... On the other hand, the complete emancipation of India itself is unthinkable while Ceylon is maintained as a solid bastion of British power in the East. From this point of view, we may say that the revolutionary struggle in Ceylon will be bound up with that on the continent in all its stages, and will constitute a provincial aspect in relation to the Indian revolution as a whole." Despite the BLPI's critique of the partition of India and the independence of Sri Lanka, the party began to draw back from its internationalist perspective and accommodate to the framework of the newly-formed states. While it was not an issue of principle that the BLPI in India and Sri Lanka remain organisationally united, the formation of new sections of the Fourth International should involve intensive discussion on the way in which the unified

revolutionary perspective would be fought for and close organisational collaboration maintained. Instead a de facto division emerged as most Sri Lankan Trotskyists returned to the island, which became the focus of their political activities at the expense of the party in India. As the political difficulties created by the post-war restabilisation of capitalism came to bear, the BLPI was liquidated into petty bourgeois radical parties on the false assumption that entrism and "left unity" offered a means of growing quickly.

11-3. It was the opportunists of the LSSP in Sri Lanka who initiated the push for the BLPI in India to enter into the Socialist Party of India, the party formed by the Congress Socialists in 1948 after they split from Congress. The LSSP's supporters inside the BLPI in India argued their "entry tactic" corresponded to the method advocated by Trotsky in the 1930s to win over important layers inside the Socialist Party of America (SPA) and the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO) to the incipient Fourth International. Entry in the 1930s had taken place as a brief tactical manoeuvre under conditions in which, due to the rise of fascism and the betrayals of Stalinism, these social democratic organisations had become a pole of attraction for workers and young people moving toward revolutionary politics. The Trotskyists retained significant freedom inside these parties to fight for their revolutionary internationalist perspective and won over important layers of workers and youth. None of these conditions applied to the Socialist Party of India, which was evolving, not to the left, but along a rightward, nationalist course to parliamentarism. Although the question of entering the Congress Socialists was debated and defeated at the BLPI's 1947 conference, supporters of the tactic pressed the issue, arguing for long-term entry into the Socialist Party in the hope of a future radicalisation in its ranks. The BLPI ignored the warnings of the International Secretariat of the Fourth International in Paris against any precipitous move and voted, at a special convention in Calcutta in October 1948, to proceed with entry.

11-4. Entry into the Socialist Party was a disaster from the outset. BLPI members had to apply for membership on an individual basis, could not form a separate internal faction and could not circulate discussion bulletins. At the same time, the Socialist Party exploited the talents and prestige of former BLPI members to build up their party apparatus, particularly in cities like Madras where none previously existed. As the Socialist Party leadership shifted further to the right, it increasingly blocked any criticism or debate. In 1952, the former BLPI members finally broke away from the Socialist Party, following its poor showing in the general election of that year and its merger with the bourgeois Kisan Mazoor Praja Party. By that stage, however, an opportunist current led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel had emerged within the Fourth International reflecting political pressures similar to those to which the

BLPI had adapted. Pabloism rapidly destroyed what remained of the BLPI in India.

11-5. In Sri Lanka, pressure mounted on the BLPI to merge with the LSSP, especially after a by-election in 1949 in which the split “left” vote enabled the UNP to win the seat. The by-election became an argument for unity to strengthen the party in the parliamentary and trade union arenas. The merger of the BLPI and LSSP in June 1950 is presented in the various LSSP histories as a fusion of two Trotskyist parties. In reality, it was the liquidation of the BLPI into what was an opportunist formation that was rapidly accommodating to parliamentarism and syndicalism. As a result of the merger, N.M. Perera, head of the largest bloc of opposition seats, became the parliamentary opposition leader. Unwilling to accommodate to the framework of the merged LSSP, Philip Gunawardena took a further step to the right, broke from the LSSP completely and formed his own party—the Viplavakari LSSP or VLSSP.

11-6. The program of the unified LSSP was confined to Sri Lanka. It was a collection of abstract truisms designed to avoid any examination of the critical strategic experiences through which the BLPI and the Fourth International had passed. It made no reference to any of the post-war political experiences of the working class in Sri Lanka, let alone elsewhere in Asia or internationally. The Chinese Revolution that had taken place less than a year before was not mentioned. The program made no explicit reference to the Theory of Permanent Revolution. None of the political differences that had emerged in the previous five years were discussed. The program declared that the party stood “uncompromisingly opposed to all forms of chauvinism” but did not discuss the LSSP’s adaptation in 1947 to the communal politics of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. Likewise it referred to the need for “real national independence” but did not deal with the LSSP’s abstention on the independence vote in 1948. In reality, the “fusion” amounted to a return to Samasamajism, that is, to the national tradition of Sri Lankan radicalism. The failure to discuss these issues demonstrated the real relations in the new party: the rightwing headed by N.M. Perera was in charge, while the former BLPI leaders provided him with “Trotskyist” credentials. Far from intervening to demand a political clarification and to oppose this unprincipled unification, the International Secretariat under Michel Pablo gave its blessing and accepted the LSSP as the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International.

12. Pabloite Opportunism

12-1. The political pressures generated by the post-war restabilisation of capitalism exhibited in the BLPI’s liquidation found their theoretical expression in the emergence of a revisionist current within the Fourth International led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. What began with Pablo’s abandonment of Trotsky’s assessment of the counterrevolutionary character of Stalinism came to embrace a revision of all the fundamentals of Marxism, replacing the struggle for the political independence of the working class with the wholesale liquidation of the sections of the Fourth International into the agencies of the bourgeoisie operating within the workers’ movement in every country.

12-2. Only after careful deliberation had the Fourth International characterised the Stalinist regimes in the so-called buffer states of Eastern Europe as “deformed workers’ states” in response to their abrupt turn in 1947–1948 to the nationalisation of industry and commencement of bureaucratic state planning. Unlike the Soviet Union, which was the product of a proletarian revolution, these states were “deformed” from the outset. The changes to property relations did not issue from mass organs of proletarian power, Soviets, led by a Bolshevik-type party, but were imposed from above by Stalinist parties that suppressed any independent activity of the working class. Moreover, as the Fourth International explained: “From the world point of view, the reforms realised by the Soviet bureaucracy in the sense of the assimilation of the buffer zone to

the USSR weigh incomparably less in the balance than the blows dealt by the Soviet bureaucracy, especially through its actions in the buffer zone, against the consciousness of the world proletariat.”[21]

12-3. As was later explained: “The use of the term *deformed* places central attention upon the crucial historical difference between the overturn of the capitalist state in October 1917 and the overturns which occurred in the late 1940s in Eastern Europe—that is, the absence of mass organs of proletarian power, Soviets led by a Bolshevik-type party. Moreover, the term implies the merely transitory existence of state regimes of dubious historical viability, whose actions in every sphere—political and economic—bear the stamp of the distorted and abnormal character of their birth. Thus, far from associating such regimes with new historical vistas, the designation *deformed* underscores the historical bankruptcy of Stalinism and points imperiously to the necessity for the building of a genuine Marxist leadership, the mobilisation of the working class against the ruling bureaucracy in a political revolution, the creation of genuine organs of workers’ power, and the destruction of the countless surviving vestiges of the old capitalist relations within the state structure and economy.”[22] As early as 1949, however, Pablo transformed what had been a provisional characterisation of regimes of a transitory character into a long-term perspective for “centuries” of “deformed workers’ states” that imbued Stalinism with a historically progressive role. Adapting to the framework of the Cold War, Pablo replaced the struggle of the international proletariat against capitalism with a new “objective reality” that “consists essentially of the capitalist regime and the Stalinist world.”

12-4. This new “reality” excluded any independent role for the working class and the Fourth International. At the Third World Congress in 1951, Pablo drew out the liquidationist implications of his theories, declaring: “What distinguishes us still more from the past, what makes for the quality of our movement today and constitutes the surest gauge of our future victories, is our growing capacity to understand, to appreciate the mass movement as it exists—often confused, often under treacherous, opportunist, centrist, bureaucratic and even bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships—and our endeavours to find a place in this movement with the aim of raising it from its present to higher levels.”[23]

12-5. In relation to Latin America, Pablo called for the liquidation of the Trotskyist movement into the anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist mass movements regardless of the class character of their leaderships. To label such movements, he declared, “as reactionary, fascist or of no concern to us would be proof of the old type of ‘Trotskyist’ immaturity and of a dogmatic, abstract, intellectualistic judgement of the mass movement ... Elsewhere, as in South Africa, Egypt, the North African colonies, in the Near East, we understand that the eventual formation of a revolutionary party now takes the road of unconditional support of the national, anti-imperialist mass movement and of integration into this movement.”[24] This orientation represented a complete repudiation of the Theory of Permanent Revolution and the struggle for the political independence of the working class from bourgeois and petty-bourgeois leaderships in the backward capitalist countries. The implications of this program were already evident in Sri Lanka and India where Philip Gunawardena and N.M. Perera had been advancing similar arguments against the old Trotskyism of the “dogmatic, abstract, intellectualistic” BLPI to justify their adaptation to Bandaranaike.

12-6. In 1948, Pablo had cautioned the BLPI against entry into the Socialist Party of India. By February 1952, however, he was advocating *entrism sui generis* (entrism of a special type) across-the-board internationally. As in India, entrism now was not a temporary tactical manoeuvre, but a long-term perspective, justified on the assumption that any future radicalisation would and could only take place through the existing labour organisations. The outcome of *entrism sui generis* in India had already resulted in the demoralisation and disorientation of former

BLPI cadres, who were trapped in an organisation that blocked any fight for a Trotskyist program. The application of this opportunist tactic internationally resulted in the destruction of more sections of the Fourth International.

12-7. The theoretical foundation of Pabloite opportunism was the method of objectivism. As was later explained: “The standpoint of objectivism is contemplation rather than revolutionary practical activity, of observation rather than struggle; it justifies what is happening rather than explains what must be done. This method provided the theoretical underpinnings for a perspective in which Trotskyism was no longer seen as the doctrine guiding the practical activity of a party determined to conquer power and change the course of history, but rather as a general interpretation of a historical process in which socialism would ultimately be realised under the leadership of non-proletarian forces hostile to the Fourth International. Insofar as Trotskyism was to be credited with any direct role in the course of events, it was merely as a sort of subliminal mental process unconsciously guiding the activities of Stalinists, neo-Stalinists, semi-Stalinists and, of course, petty-bourgeois nationalists of one type or another.”[25]

12-8. The objectivist method transformed the Theory of Permanent Revolution from a revolutionary guide to action for the sections of the Fourth International into an external description of an inexorable historical process that worked itself out through the medium of other parties and leaderships. Instead of providing the means for building Trotskyist parties in the working class, the Theory of Permanent Revolution was converted by the Pabloites into a method for glorifying movements led by bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties.

12-9. The political struggle against Pabloite opportunism culminated in the publication of the Open Letter to the world Trotskyist movement on November 16, 1953 by James P. Cannon, the leader of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The Open Letter was the rallying point for orthodox Trotskyists and led to the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) with the support of the British and French sections. The letter summarised the fundamental principles of Trotskyism:

1. The death agony of the capitalist system threatens the destruction of civilisation through worsening depressions, world wars and barbaric manifestations like fascism. The development of atomic weapons today underlines the danger in the gravest possible way.

2. 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.

3. This can be accomplished only under the leadership of the working class in society. But the working class itself faces a crisis in leadership although the world relationship of social forces was never so favourable as today for the workers to take the road to power.

4. To organise itself for carrying out this world-historic aim, the working class in each country must construct a revolutionary socialist party in the pattern developed by Lenin; that is, a combat party capable of dialectically combining democracy and centralism—democracy in arriving at decisions, centralism in carrying them out; a leadership controlled by the ranks, ranks able to carry forward under fire in disciplined fashion.

5. 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. The penalty for these betrayals is paid by working people in the form of consolidation of fascist or monarchist forces, and new outbreaks of war fostered and prepared by capitalism. From its inception, the Fourth International set as one of its major tasks the revolutionary overthrow of Stalinism inside and outside the USSR.

6. The need for flexible tactics facing many sections of the Fourth International, and parties or groups sympathetic to its program, makes it all the more imperative that they know how to fight imperialism and all its petty-bourgeois agencies (such as nationalist formations or trade union bureaucracies) without capitulation to Stalinism; and conversely, know how to fight Stalinism (which in the final analysis is a petty-bourgeois agency of imperialism) without capitulating to imperialism.[26]

12-10. The Open Letter reviewed the role of Pablo in providing a political cover for Stalinism in the 1953 strike movement in East Germany and the French general strike. Turning to the fate of the Chinese Trotskyists at the hands of Pablo, the Open Letter declared: “Particularly revolting is the slanderous misrepresentation Pablo has fostered of the political position of the Chinese section of the Fourth International. They have been pictured by the Pablo faction as ‘sectarians’, as ‘refugees from a revolution’ ... Pablo’s line of conciliationism towards Stalinism leads him inexorably to touch up the Mao regime *couleur de rose* while putting grey tints on the firm, principled stand of our Chinese comrades.”[27]

12-11. After a thorough consideration of the evolution of the Maoist regime that the Socialist Workers Party in the US and the ICFI designated China as a deformed workers’ state. In a resolution adopted at its 1955 national convention, the SWP provided a detailed analysis of the Chinese revolution: its impact on world politics and the transformation of class relations within China as well as of the Stalinist CCP and its policies. Summing up the process, the document concluded that after the 1949 revolution: “The objective dynamics, the inner logic of the struggle against imperialist intervention forced the bureaucracy to break with capitalism, nationalise the decisive means of production, impose the monopoly of foreign trade, institute planning, and in this way clear the road for the introduction of production relations and institutions that constitute the foundation of a workers’ state, which China is today, even though a Stalinist caricature thereof. China is a deformed workers’ state because of the Stalinist deformation of the Third Chinese Revolution.”[28]

12-12. The subsequent evolution of the Chinese regime, which restored capitalist property relations in the 1980s and transformed the country into the world’s premier cheap labour platform, has fully vindicated the International Committee’s principled position. In opposition to the Pabloites, the ICFI insisted that, without the overthrow of the CCP regime through a political revolution led by the working class, the Maoists guided by the nationalist perspective of “Socialism in One Country” would inevitably become the agents of capitalist restoration as was foreseen by Trotsky in *The Revolution Betrayed*. At the same time, the ICFI opposed various “state capitalist” tendencies that dismissed the enormous sweep of the Chinese Revolution, the subsequent nationalisation of private enterprises and the institution of economic planning, and in doing so, sided openly or tacitly with imperialism against the deformed workers’ state.

To be continued

Footnotes:

21. David North, *The Heritage We Defend: A Contribution to the History of the Fourth International* (Detroit: Labor Publications, 1988), p. 158.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 178–9.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 194–5.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

26. In *Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Volume One (London: New Park, 1974), pp. 299-300.

27. *Ibid.*, p.312.

28. *The Third Chinese Revolution and its aftermath*, Education for Socialists, Socialist Workers Party National Education Department, 1976, p. 7.

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