

The LSSP's Great Betrayal: Part 2

LSSP rejects the ICFI's defence of Trotskyism

By Saman Gunadasa
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This is the second of four articles on the political lessons of great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which in June 1964 joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike. For the first time, a party claiming to be Trotskyist entered into a bourgeois government—an open repudiation of the fundamental principles of international socialism.

The LSSP's betrayal had a profound significance for the international Trotskyist movement. It confirmed the opportunist character of the political tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, from which the genuine Trotskyists broke in 1953 to form the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). At every stage, the Pabloites facilitated and condoned the political downsliding of the LSSP, paving the way for its entry into the Bandaranaike government.

The second article deals with the LSSP's unprincipled opposition to the formation of the ICFI and its subsequent political degeneration as part of the Pabloite International Secretariat of the Fourth International. The first article can be read here.

The rejection by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) of the Open Letter issued by US Socialist Workers Party (SWP) leader James P. Cannon in November 1953 marked a sharp turning point in its political degeneration. The Open Letter, which led to the establishment of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), represented the authoritative voice of orthodox Trotskyism, calling for an intransigent fight against the opportunism of Michel Pablo and his clique in the leadership of the Fourth International.

The revisionism of Pablo and Ernest Mandel expressed the political pressures that were brought to bear on the Trotskyist movement by the post-war restabilisation of world capitalism under the aegis of US imperialism as a result of the betrayals of Stalinism. Pablo and Mandel seized on the establishment of Stalinist regimes in the so-called buffer states of Eastern Europe to junk Trotsky's characterisation of Stalinism as a counter-revolutionary force within the working class.

After a painstaking theoretical discussion, the Fourth International characterised the Eastern European regimes as “deformed workers’ states.” The definition took into account the nationalisation of capitalist property that took place, but underscored the deformed character of these states. Unlike the Soviet Union, they did not emerge from a proletarian revolution

but rested on a Stalinist bureaucracy that suppressed the working class. The definition pointed to the temporary, transitional nature of the regimes and to the tasks of the Fourth International: the building of Trotskyist parties to independently mobilise the working class in a political revolution against the Stalinist apparatuses.

Pablo and Mandel, however, took this characterisation as the starting point for a wholesale revision of the Fourth International's analysis of Stalinism. The “deformed workers’ states” were ascribed a historically progressive role. In his Open Letter, Cannon explained: “In place of emphasizing the danger of a new barbarism, he [Pablo] sees the drive toward socialism as ‘irreversible’; yet he does not see socialism coming within our generation or some generations to come. Instead he has advanced the concept of an ‘engulfing’ wave of revolutions that give birth to nothing but ‘deformed,’ that is, Stalin-type workers states which are to last for ‘centuries’.”

The Open Letter explained the liquidationist character of Pabloism, which “looks to the Stalinist bureaucracy, or a decisive section of it, to so change itself under mass pressure as to accept the ‘ideas’ and ‘program’ of Trotskyism.” The Pabloite outlook rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and thus the essential task of the Fourth International to resolve the crisis of leadership in the workers’ movement by building sections in every country. The Trotskyist movement was reduced to the role of adviser to the counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracies.

Cannon wrote: “To sum up: The lines of cleavage between Pablo's revisionism and orthodox Trotskyism are so deep that no compromise is possible either politically or organisationally.” Pablo's adaptation to Stalinism was one aspect of his opportunism, which in the name of integrating the Fourth International into existing mass movements, politically subordinated the working class in every country to the existing treacherous leaderships—Stalinist, social democratic, and, in countries like Sri Lanka, bourgeois nationalist.

The LSSP rejected Cannon's Open Letter even though the party had just expelled a pro-Stalinist tendency from its own ranks. Despite being critical of Pablo's orientation, the LSSP leadership refused to take a stand on the fundamental political issues raised in the Open Letter and accused Cannon of jeopardising the unity of the Fourth International, saying the SWP's move would “be catastrophic to our movement as a whole.”

In a letter to the LSSP in February 1954, Cannon cautioned: “I

must tell you frankly that I think the LSSP entered on a dangerous path when it adopted its resolution condemning the publication of our Open Letter, in advance of taking a position on the political questions in dispute.” After noting the LSSP’s expulsion of its own pro-Stalinists, he emphasised that it was not enough to stop there. “As internationalists, it is obligatory that we take the same attitude toward open or covert manifestations of Stalinist conciliationism in other parties and in the international movement generally. This is, in fact the touchstone of internationalism in the present crisis,” Cannon wrote.

Cannon made a further perceptive warning: “The LSSP—more than any other party, I venture to say—requires an international leadership which will be a source of strength and support to its Trotskyist orthodoxy—the sole condition for its survival and eventual victory—rather than an organizing center of creeping liquidationism and disruption.”

The LSSP did not heed the warning and, despite its criticisms of Pablo’s perspective, remained inside the Pabloite International Secretariat (IS) of the Fourth International. The LSSP leaders were well aware that as part of the ICFI, their own opportunist practices in Sri Lanka would come under scrutiny and be opposed. The Pabloites, however, not only condoned and encouraged the LSSP’s opportunism but gave it Trotskyist credentials. In return, Pablo and Mandel could claim to have a mass Trotskyist party in Asia.

The LSSP had already begun to measure success by the number of its parliamentary seats and the size of its trade union membership. Its parliamentarist outlook was evident in the political crisis that erupted in August 1953, just months before the Open Letter. The LSSP, together with the Stalinist Communist Party and the right-wing breakaway VLSSP, called a one-day hartal—a general strike and business closures—to put pressure on the United National Party (UNP) government to withdraw drastic austerity measures. The response took them all completely by surprise as the militant protest movement extended beyond one day and enveloped large portions of the island. The government was on the verge of collapse and the prime minister resigned. Far from seeking to extend and develop the struggle, the LSSP and its allies sought to shut it down as quickly as possible, allowing the government to cling to office. In its wake, the LSSP leadership concluded that the fight was now to “compel the UNP government to resign and hold a fresh election.”

As the militant hartal movement waned, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), formed in 1951 by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, was able to capitalise on disenchantment with the LSSP, especially among the rural masses. It combined Sinhala populism with anti-imperialist and socialistic demagoguery. Shocked by the scope of the hartal, sections of the bourgeoisie swung their support behind the SLFP as a means of containing widespread popular discontent. In the run-up to the 1956 election, the SLFP appealed to layers of the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie with its policy of making Sinhala the only official national language, discriminating against national minorities, especially Tamil speakers.

Far from exposing Bandaranaike’s political charlatanism, the LSSP increasingly adapted to his Sinhala chauvinism. While formally opposing the “Sinhala-only” policy and warning of its

potential for sowing communal divisions, the LSSP reached a no-contest election pact with the SLFP, thus lending credibility to its claims to represent a progressive alternative to the UNP. After the SLFP won the 1956 election in a landslide, the LSSP adopted a stance of “responsive cooperation” toward the new government and voted in favour of its first two Throne Speeches outlining government policy for the year. The Pabloite IS raised no objections to the LSSP’s adaptation to communal politics, because this was integrating into the “real mass movement”—as the Pabloites advocated in every country.

By 1960, the LSSP had, with the full support of the IS, completely embraced the parliamentary road to power. In the election in March, declaring that the UNP and SLFP were both discredited, the party campaigned for “a Samasamajist government” through the ballot box. At the same time, its election platform significantly watered down its opposition to “Sinhala only” and its support for citizenship for Tamil plantation workers. The IS enthusiastically embraced the LSSP’s campaign, declaring that its Sri Lankan section was engaged in “a decisive struggle for power.”

Far from winning the election, the LSSP fared worse than in 1956. In response, it shifted even further to the right. LSSP leader N.M. Perera called for the party to prepare for entry into a capitalist government led by the SLFP—a move that was narrowly defeated. At a second election in July, following the collapse of the fragile UNP government, the LSSP again reached a no-contest agreement with the SLFP, and voted for its first budget and Throne Speech after it won office.

Concerned that its own credibility would be undermined, the Pabloite IS raised limited criticisms of the LSSP’s opportunism, declaring that the no-contest agreement could encourage “illusions about the nature of the SLFP among the great masses.” At the same time, the IS stated: “We accept that it is possible for a revolutionary party to give critical support to a non-working class government (whether middle class or capitalist) in a colonial or semi-colonial country.” Thus, Pabloites left the door wide open for the LSSP to manoeuvre with the SLFP government, paving the path for its eventual entry into the cabinet just four years later.

To be continued

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