

Sri Lanka: Pseudo-left USP willing to ally with any capitalist party

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On the closing day of nominations for the August 17 general election, Siritunga Jayasuriya, leader of the pseudo-left United Socialist Party (USP), made clear his party's outlook in a nutshell: the USP is a political outfit for hire, willing to ally with any capitalist party, no matter how reactionary, and dress it up for voters in false democratic colours. He bragged that the USP had supported both of the two major bourgeois parties at different times—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Jayasuriya is leading the USP election slate in Jaffna. Speaking to journalists outside the Jaffna District Secretariat on July 13, he declared: “The main two capitalist parties the [SLFP-led] UPFA or the UNP they talk about the Tamil people, but have not come out with a solution.”

Jayasuriya's criticisms of the UNP and SLFP for failing the Tamil minority were completely duplicitous as this writer from the WSWs made clear by interjecting: “But, you were on [political] platforms with the UNP in recent years!”

In response, Jayasuriya boasted: “Not only with [UNP leader and current prime minister] Ranil Wickremesinghe. In 1993, I marched from Colombo to Kataragama with Mahinda Rajapakse [former president and SLFP leader]. But we did not join to form a government.” If a government is doing the wrong thing, “we fight together with anybody. We will shake hand with devil to fight against the oppressor.”

The USP, however, has never fought to defend democratic rights, but rather has, in every instance, sought to subordinate the working class and oppressed masses to one bourgeois party or another by promoting the illusion that it would defend their rights. Invariably these parties in government have been just as ruthless as their rivals in the repression of working people.

In 1993, Jayasuriya did march with Mahinda Rajapakse against the massacres of rural youth being carried out by death squads, working arm-in-arm with the military and the UNP government. The UNP had launched a communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983 but sought to end it in 1987 through the Indo-Lanka Accord that brought Indian “peace-keeping” troops into northern Sri Lanka.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) launched a chauvinist campaign against the Accord with its gunmen killing hundreds

of workers as well as political and trade union leaders who refused to support it. Having exploited the JVP campaign to intimidate the working class, the UNP eventually turned, not only on the JVP and its leaders, but its social base among Sinhalese rural youth. The death squads slaughtered an estimated 60,000 people and imprisoned and tortured more.

The purpose of the 1993 march was to promote the SLFP's electoral prospects and promote its fraudulent promises to bring peace and democracy to Sri Lanka. The SLFP came to power under President Chandrika Kumaratunga the following year only to intensify the war, extend police-state measures and make further inroads into the living standards of working people.

The inveterate opportunist Jayasuriya takes no responsibility for the disaster that he helped bring about. Less than a decade later, he teamed up with the UNP—the author of the massacres—to promote its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, a minister in the previous UNP government, as the democratic alternative to Kumaratunga. He was Wickremesinghe's right-hand man in organising joint protests in 2001 against her government's anti-democratic measures.

The USP has continued to function as a tacit ally of the UNP and Wickremesinghe right down to the present. After Rajapakse won the presidency in 2005, the USP joined the UNP in protesting against the government's murderous attacks on political opponents and the media. During the 2010 presidential election, it continued to back the UNP even as it supported former army chief Sarath Fonseka, who is directly responsible for war crimes, as the joint opposition candidate.

Along with various liberal organisations and other pseudo-left groups, the USP played a prominent role in the US-orchestrated regime-change operation that saw the ousting of Rajapakse in the presidential election this January. It led to the installation of Maithripala Sirisena as president and Wickremesinghe as prime minister. Washington's opposition to Rajapakse was not because of his government's war crimes and human rights atrocities, but because he was too closely tied to China.

A USP election leaflet declares: “There is no policy difference between UNP and the SLFP. Both these parties might come to the same position after August election.” This is

to obscure the immense dangers facing the working class as the UNP and SLFP enmesh the island in the geo-political rivalry between the US and China and the preparations for war.

As in the case of Kumaratunga, Jayasuriya denies any responsibility for assisting Sirisena and Wickremesinghe into office. In just seven months, this new government has already demonstrated its anti-working class character, unleashing security forces against striking health workers, protests in Jaffna and student demonstrations.

Speaking to journalists in Jaffna this month, Jayasuriya denied that he had supported Sirisena. “I [only] said remove Mahinda. People thought Maithri [Sirisena] would bring blessings. That’s the problem of this country. People are looking for a shortcut,” he complained. Jayasuriya and the USP, however, did absolutely nothing to dispel the illusions in Sirisena and thus helped him into power.

In an extraordinary remark, Jayasuriya declared that he would be prepared if need be to do another about face and support Rajapakse—the man the USP has been denouncing as a fascist and a dictator. “If Ranil [Wickremesinghe] becomes [an oppressor], we will join hands with Mahinda Rajapakse,” he said.

It is significant that the USP leader has decided to lead his party’s slate in Jaffna, which is yet to recover from more than a quarter century of communal war that has left many people homeless, jobless and struggling to survive. The entire area remains under military occupation that subjects the largely Tamil population to constant surveillance and harassment.

Amid widespread resentment and discontent, the USP senses an opportunity to provide its services to the increasingly discredited bourgeois Tamil parties in Jaffna, including the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) that controls the provincial council.

Jayasuriya made a direct pitch to the parties by declaring that the USP “completely defends the right to self-determination.” He continued: “Progressive people, workers, youth and peasants must gather with the Tamil and Muslim people in the north-east to build a strong force to force the capitalist system to find a long lasting solution for the national question.”

What a complete fraud! Jayasuriya’s pitch on “self-determination” is aimed not at defending the democratic rights of Tamil workers and the rural poor, but at defending the program of the Tamil bourgeoisie for greater autonomy or a separate capitalist state in the north and east of the island. His call for “a strong force” is an appeal for an opportunist front with the TNA and other Tamil parties.

It is also aimed at covering up the central political lesson of the LTTE’s defeat in 2009 in which tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed by the Sri Lankan military. The LTTE’s collapse was not primarily military, but the result of its political program.

The LTTE represented the class interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie and thus resorted to ruthless measures to suppress

any opposition by Tamil workers or peasants. Based on Tamil separatism and chauvinism, the LTTE was utterly incapable of making any appeal to working people in the south of Sri Lanka or more broadly in South Asia and internationally. Instead, it appealed to US imperialism and the Indian government, even as they were supporting the Colombo government and its war both diplomatically and militarily.

The perspective advanced by the TNA and other bourgeois Tamil parties is no less disastrous. They are seeking a power-sharing arrangement with Colombo that would grant them more power at the provincial levels and a greater share of the profits from the joint exploitation of the working class and rural masses. They will be no less ruthless than the governments in Colombo in suppressing the opposition of working people.

The entire history of Sri Lanka since formal independence from Britain in 1948 and particularly the long and brutal communal war demonstrates the truth of Leon Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution: that all factions of the bourgeoisie in economically backward countries are organically incapable of fulfilling the democratic tasks.

It is completely false to suggest, as Jayasuriya does, that “a strong force can force the capitalist system” to grant democratic rights to Tamils or any other section of working people. The only social force capable of fighting for democratic rights is the working class. It can only do so by unifying and mobilising independently of all factions of the ruling class, not on the basis of pressuring capitalist governments but of abolishing capitalism, establishing a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

The so-called “national question” in Sri Lanka—that is, the oppression of ethnic minorities—is a product of the profit system that depends on dividing the working class. Tamil people cannot win their democratic rights, including ending the military occupation of the North and East, the release of all political prisoners and the abolition of all discriminatory laws, without fighting for socialism as part of a unified movement led by the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party that fights for this perspective which is encapsulated in its slogan for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for a United Socialist States of South Asia and the world. We urge workers and youth to support our campaign in Jaffna as well as Colombo and Nuwara Eliya to advance this program and to build the revolutionary leadership required to carry it out.

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