

Sri Lankan government sponsors a sham celebration of the Russian Revolution

By Vijith Samarasinghe
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Under the patronage of the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, the Russian embassy in Colombo organised a seminar and exhibition, at the end of March, claiming to celebrate the centenary of the Russian Revolution.

The government grabbed the opportunity to throw a stale crumb to the pseudo-lefts that supported it in taking office. The fake lefts painted Sirisena's election as president in January 2015 as similar to the February revolution in 1917 that dethroned the Russian Tsar's dictatorship.

The real objective of those who sponsored or patronised this bogus celebration was to totally distort the history and the lessons of the 1917 revolution, as well as the political history of Sri Lanka, in order to give a political boost to the increasingly unpopular Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

According to Jayampathy Wickramaratne, a government parliamentarian, the "Centenary Celebration" held in March was the first in a series of government-supported events to be held around the island. He explained that a number of events, including an international scholarly conference, will be held in Colombo to mark the centenary.

The Colombo seminar was a congregation of right-wing politicians, pseudo-lefts and anti-Marxist representatives of academia who are deeply hostile to the heritage of Russian Revolution and any independent political mobilisation of the working class. After a speech by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe, the keynote address was delivered by Jayadewa Uyangoda, a Colombo University political science professor.

Wickremesinghe said the Russian Revolution had a critical influence on shaping social reforms in the 20th century throughout the world, including in Sri Lanka. Yet, he was quick to add that "in 1917 Leon Trotsky and the Bolshevik leaders took power by the bullet, but we can't do it today. This is because the soviet system couldn't deliver what people expected. We saw how it collapsed."

In one go, Wickremesinghe uttered two grotesque lies to

slander the October 1917 Revolution. He falsified the October events by denigrating them as a gun battle, hiding the historical truth that it was the masses of workers, with the support of the multi-million peasantry, which made the revolution under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party.

At the same time, Wickremesinghe repeated the worn-out falsehood identifying the Bolshevik government with the degenerated Stalinist bureaucratic rule that later usurped political power in the Soviet Union through a protracted struggle against the revolutionary internationalist forces led by Trotsky's Left Opposition.

Wickremesinghe shares these reactionary views with the pseudo-lefts in Sri Lanka and around the world.

Affirming the distortions peddled by the fake lefts, the prime minister said: "We have also done two revolutions in Sri Lanka." According to him, the first was Sirisena's elevation to the presidency, backed by the Obama Washington administration in January 2015, and the second was the formation of a National Unity Government by the country's two main capitalist parties, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the United National Party (UNP).

Appealing for the continued support of the left fakers, Wickremesinghe said: "Like Lenin and Trotsky, we should take the victories of these revolutions forward."

The magnitude of Wickremesinghe's distortion can be gauged when it is set against the Marxist view of revolution. Leon Trotsky explained that "the most indubitable feature of a revolution is the direct interference of the masses in historical events ... the forcible entry of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own fate." How distant is the January 2015 regime-change operation in Sri Lanka from this social dynamic of a revolution!

Sirisena's installation was the culmination of Washington's project to oust the former President Mahinda Rajapakse for increasingly leaning toward Beijing, which the US considered as a hindrance to its geo-political offensive against China. Rajapakse's removal was the result of behind-the-scenes intrigues by pro-US political operators

together with a campaign by various pseudo-lefts, unions, NGOs and professionals to falsely paint Sirisena as the champion of democracy.

In his speech, Wickremesinghe referred to the opportunist role of his father, Esmond Wickremesinghe, to further reassure the pseudo-lefts about their own careerism. He related how his father, once a young member of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), later became a leading strategist of the right-wing UNP.

Gamini Viyangoda, a “civil society leader” and government apologist, later elaborated on this point. He said that in 1939, Esmond Wickremesinghe, along with N. Shanmugadasan, who later became the leader of the Stalinist Communist party (Chinese wing), were arrested by the police for distributing revolutionary leaflets as LSSP student activists. Viyangoda noted: “Maithripala Sirisena, who started his political life with Shanmugadasan’s party in the 1960s, is the president today and Esmond Wickremesinghe’s son is the prime minister.”

Viyangoda avoided any concrete historical facts about the episode he cited, in his haste to paint a distorted picture about the “progressive lineage” of both Sirisena and Wickremesinghe.

Esmond Wickremesinghe and Shanmugadasan represented social elements which were attracted to the socialist politics of the LSSP, the only political movement in the country that fought for national independence under the British colonial rule during the 1930s. But Shanmugadasan joined the minority Stalinist faction that was expelled from the LSSP in December 1939 for supporting the imperialist war waged by the British colonial master, while Wickremesinghe hung on inside the LSSP a little longer.

Under the conditions of the establishment of the fake independent state in the late 1940s and the post-World War II international economic boom, petty-bourgeois elements, like Esmond Wickremesinghe, that earlier supported the LSSP, rapidly abandoned their left leanings in their adaptation to the capitalist state. Every modern-day opportunist would readily emulate their treacherous record, including Viyangoda and his fake left companions.

Professor Uyangoda’s keynote address was another testament to the sharp turn to the right of the ex-radicals. His speech, titled “From February to October: The Legacy of Russian Revolution and Sri Lanka Today,” was another monstrous misrepresentation of the revolutionary history of 1917.

Uyangoda’s task was to dismiss the plausibility of any mass social revolution today. He echoed Wickremesinghe’s position, saying: “[A] little over two years ago, we saw a renewal of impetus for reform.” Then he stressed: “The agenda of political reform, and not that of revolution, has

reached the centre of the current historical process of political change in Sri Lanka.”

To claim there is no potential today for a revolutionary alternative against capitalism is a cynical distortion of the present world situation. Coinciding with the revolutionary explosions in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, mass working-class resistance was developing in Sri Lanka against the Rajapakse government’s attacks on democratic rights and living conditions. Despite the brutal repression and killing of protestors, thousands took to the streets on issues such as attacks on workers’ superannuation, education privatisation, subsidy cuts and water pollution.

This momentum was temporarily diverted by the 2015 regime-change, with the full support of the pseudo-left, trade unions and so-called “left-intellectuals.” However, it is now resurging in strikes and protests against the privatisation and austerity agenda of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

These attempts to falsify the history and political lessons of the Russian Revolution under the cover of “Centenary Celebrations” demonstrate the deep concern within the ruling class about a new generation of workers and youth being educated and inspired by the lessons of 1917.

Millions of workers internationally are being driven into a renewed upsurge of class struggle, faced by the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s, deepening austerity and the imperialist drive towards a new world war. The most advanced elements among them will inevitably turn toward the experiences of the Russian Revolution. The WSWS invites the workers and youth of Sri Lanka and South Asia to join our international online lecture series on the centenary of the Russian Revolution and study the real lessons of the revolution drawn by the Marxist movement.

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