

The Maruti Suzuki workers and the re-emergence of class struggle across South Asia

By Wije Dias
7 May 2018

Wije Dias, general secretary of the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, and a veteran Trotskyist of more than 50 years standing, spoke from Colombo to the ICFI's International Online May Day Rally.

Karl Marx, the mighty thinker and revolutionist born 200 years ago today, blazed the path for the socialist emancipation of the working class by revealing the objective foundation and logic of its struggle against the deprivations of capitalism.

Among the most searing and scathing of Marx's writings were his exposures of the violence, banditry, and duplicity by which the British bourgeoisie subjugated and economically bled the Indian subcontinent, or in contemporary parlance South Asia, the Crown Jewel of its Empire. Wrote Marx, "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization, lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked."

Anticipated and politically prepared in Marx's writings, the 1917 Russian Revolution—the centenary of which we marked last year—gave a tremendous impetus to the struggle against capitalism and imperialism in South Asia. For three decades, from the concluding years of the First World War through 1947, South Asia was convulsed by an anti-imperialist upsurge.

But, as Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International forewarned, the colonial bourgeoisie that grew up in the shadow of imperialism was hostile to the revolutionary mobilization of South Asia's toilers.

Terrified for its own property and fearful of the growing militancy of the working class, the rival incipient bourgeoisies of India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka negotiated a transfer of power in 1947–48, in which they inherited control of the British colonial status apparatus, and connived in the partition of South Asia on communal and ethnic lines. Not only were none of the burning problems of the democratic revolution—including the eradication of landlordism and casteism resolved. A reactionary state structure was imposed that has frustrated rational economic development, enshrined communalism, fueled a reactionary military-strategic rivalry between the states of Indian and Pakistan, and served as a mechanism for

imperialism to exercise its domination.

Seven decades on, South Asia is a geopolitical and social powder-keg.

At the previous May Day rallies of the ICFI, we have warned that South Asia and the Indian Ocean region have been sucked into the maelstrom of imperialist and great-power conflict. For this, US imperialism is principally responsible. It has been waging a brutal neo-colonial war in Afghanistan for the past seventeen years and it has spared no effort to harness India to its reckless military-strategic offensive against China. In the process, Washington has dramatically downgraded its relations with its traditional regional ally Pakistan, thereby overturning the regional "balance of terror" between South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers.

The Indian bourgeoisie, anxious for a leg up on Pakistan and China so as to realize its own predatory great-power ambitions, has eagerly accepted Washington's offer to serve as a US imperialist satrap.

This process has accelerated under the rule of Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP, and with the most ominous consequences for the region and the world. Twice in the course of the past two years—first in the fall of 2016 with Pakistan and then last summer with China—India came to the brink of a border war that could have rapidly escalated into an all-out military confrontation; and one, potentially involving the US and other great powers.

Much is made in the western corporate media of the economic transformation of South Asia as it is enmeshed evermore tightly within global capitalist production chains. In reality, the fruits of capitalist development have accrued to a tiny capitalist elite and their political henchmen. For the masses, poverty, economic insecurity, and squalor prevail.

In Bangladesh four million garment workers toil in sweatshops, six and even seven days a week, many earning as little as \$US65 a month. As part of his "Make In India" campaign aimed at wooing foreign investors, Modi has boasted that industrial wages in India are no more than a quarter those in China.

Since the mid-1990s, the number of Indian billionaires has

increased fifty-fold, from two to more than a hundred, and the share of income appropriated by the top 1 percent has swelled to 23 percent

The working class, however, is not just an object of exploitation. Among the tens of millions in South Asia toiling in the new globally-connected industries and the broader masses there is mounting social opposition.

Recent months have seen a wave of strikes in India, involving among others, Tamil Nadu bus drivers and teachers, rural health workers in north India, and 1.5 million Uber and Ola drivers, as well as large protests by fishermen, peasants and Dalits.

In an alarmed article this week, India's former National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan, urged the government and its ostensible opponents in the political elite to take "anticipatory steps" to defuse and, if need be, quell social unrest. "The situation within the country," wrote Narayanan, "appears far from reassuring. ... Protests and agitations have a life of their own and underestimating their potential could be cause for grief. Hence it might be worthwhile for the nation's leaders to pay heed to the ancient Chinese proverb, 'the wind sweeping through the tower heralds a storm rising in the mountain.'"

Similarly in Sri Lanka, workers, students and the rural and urban poor are rebelling against the brutal IMF-dictated austerity measures being implemented by the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe coalition government.

This resurgence of class struggle is laying bare on what objective force the struggle against the bourgeoisie and its agenda of war and reaction must be based.

The great question is to politically arm this movement with a revolutionary socialist perspective, program, and leadership.

The mobilization of the working class as an independent political force requires an unrelenting struggle against the phony establishment left parties, the trade union apparatuses, and their pseudo-left allies.

In India, the Stalinists have responded to the intensification of the class struggle by redoubling their efforts to subordinate the working class to the bourgeoisie, declaring their readiness to ally, in the name of fighting the BJP, with the Congress Party—the traditional governing party of the Indian bourgeoisie and the party that spearheaded its drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for global capital and to forge a "global strategic partnership" with US imperialism.

The Stalinists' attitude toward the struggles and striving of the working class is exemplified by their complete abandonment of the 13 Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant workers who have been jailed for life on frame-up murder charges. Employers in India routinely threaten workers with "doing a Maruti Suzuki," that is savagely repressing a challenge to poverty wages and brutal working conditions in concert with the police, courts and political establishment. Yet the Stalinists treat the jailed Maruti Suzuki workers like lepers,

censoring any mention of their plight and struggle, for fear it would disrupt their cozy relations with the employers and the Congress Party.

In Sri Lanka, the role of the pseudo-left is no less pernicious. They lined up in support of the "regime-change" operation Washington orchestrated three-and-a-half years ago to get rid of a right-wing president deemed too close to China, hailing the "common opposition" as a democratic alternative. Now that mass struggles have erupted against the pro-austerity, pro-imperialist government they helped bring to power, they are doing everything to isolate and smother them. Above all, they seek to prevent the working class from constituting itself as an independent political force, advancing its own socialist solution to the social crisis and rallying the oppressed toilers behind it in the fight for a workers' government.

At this May Day 2018 rally, the ICFI urges workers around the world to intensify the campaign to win the freedom of the Maruti Suzuki class-war prisoners.

We urge workers and youth to join with us in building an anti-war movement across the reactionary state boundaries of South Asia, as part of a global working-class led movement against imperialist violence and capitalism, the source of all want and war.

And last but not least, I urge all those listening today to join the ICFI. Workers around the world face fundamentally the same problems and enemy, and will increasingly be drawn into struggles against austerity and war that spill across state boundaries and continents. But the objective unity of the working class must find conscious expression in the building of a World Party of Socialist Revolution. The ICFI is that party.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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