

The 50th anniversary of the founding of the SEP (Sri Lanka)

The RCL/SEP's political struggle against the LSSP's betrayal

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This is the fourth in a series of articles published by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka to mark the 50th anniversary of its foundation in June 1968.

*Established as the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), it was renamed the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in 1996. A **statement** has been published to mark the RCL's founding congress on June 16–17, 1968.*

These articles elaborate the RCL's principled foundations and draw the essential political lessons from the struggle for these principles over the past 50 years. The RCL was founded on the program and perspective of socialist internationalism that the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which claimed to be a Trotskyist party, had betrayed by entering the bourgeois government of Madam Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964.

Central to the work of the SEP has been the fight for Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which established that in countries of a belated capitalist development only the working class is capable of leading the struggle for the basic democratic and social rights of the workers and rural toilers as part of the fight for socialism internationally. These lessons are critical for the emerging struggles of the working class, not only in Sri Lanka, but throughout Asia and the world.

The political struggle of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), against the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's (LSSP) historic betrayal in 1964 took its sharpest form in the fight against the second coalition government.

The LSSP came to power a second time in 1970 as part of a coalition led by the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and including the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL). The next seven years of coalition rule, far from proving to be in any sense progressive, paved the way for pro-market restructuring and the communal civil war that was to devastate the island from 1983.

The RCL waged a consistent struggle, under difficult conditions, against the coalition government led by Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike, and particularly the LSSP, which continued to dishonestly trade on its previous Trotskyist record.

In doing so, the RCL upheld Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated the inability of the bourgeoisie to fulfill the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people. The party fought for the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie in the struggle for a workers' and peasant's government and socialist policies.

The coalition came to power amid an international wave of revolutionary upheavals during the period 1968–1975, including the French general strike of May–June 1968, the urban riots in US cities, Italy's hot autumn of strikes in 1969 and the fall of dictatorships in

Greece, Spain and Portugal. This upsurge was betrayed by the Social Democrats, Stalinists and trade unions, aided and abetted by the Pabloite revisionists, who had abandoned the principles of Trotskyism in the 1953 split in the Fourth International.

This crisis was acute in the Indian sub-continent, including in Sri Lanka where there was a marked rise in working class struggles and rural unrest. Amid widespread hostility to the openly right-wing United National Party (UNP), the coalition government was installed in 1970 in a bid to contain the movement of the working class.

After a crucial clarification of its political line during the 1970 election, the RCL advanced the tactical demand for the LSSP and CPSL to break from the bourgeois coalition and fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

The RCL's principled line was vehemently opposed by Pabloite groups such as the LSSP (R) and the Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP). Thulsiri Andradi, an RWP leader, denounced the RCL for encouraging illusions in the LSSP and CPSL. In reality, under conditions in which workers still had considerable illusions, particularly in the LSSP, the demand that it break with the SLFP exposed the LSSP's role as the defender of this bourgeois party and its anti-working class program.

The *Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party* explained: "The RCL's demand... was not aimed at promoting these parties, but rather at breaking their grip over socialist-minded layers of the working class who still grudgingly looked to the LSSP and CP for leadership... the left-sounding denunciation [of this demand] was, in fact, an evasion of the essential political task of exposing the LSSP and CP and thus left workers in the hands of these parties."

The duplicity of the LSSP (R) and RWP was revealed in their opposition to any political struggle in the trade unions against the LSSP. LSSP (R) leader Bala Tampoe, who also led the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), advocated union militancy but insisted on "no politics" in the unions as it would affect the unity of the struggle.

In reality, "no politics" in the unions meant no revolutionary politics. The appeal for "unity" was not for a unified struggle of workers against the coalition government, but a unified struggle of union bureaucrats to prevent such a fight. Tampoe and Andradi were deeply hostile to anything that might disrupt their opportunist relations with the LSSP and CPSL.

The ruthless character of the Coalition government was demonstrated in its bloody repression of the ill-conceived uprising in 1971 led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in which an estimated 15,000 Sinhala rural youth were slaughtered and many more jailed indefinitely. Despite its fundamental political differences with the JVP, the RCL waged a protracted campaign, detailed in Part Three, to demand the release of political prisoners

In the wake of the JVP uprising, the Bandaranaike government turned

further to the right, whipping up Sinhala communalism to divide workers and youth, and to shore up its base among the Sinhala petty bourgeoisie. LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva was responsible for drawing up a new communal constitution that enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and Sinhala as the state language. Its discriminatory measures against Tamils set in motion processes, detailed in the next part of this series, that would engulf the island in a disastrous civil war.

Divisive Sinhala chauvinism, along with police-state repression, was the government's reactionary tools in confronting the rising working-class unrest. In August-September 1972, strikes erupted among irrigation technicians and bank workers over pay. More than 200,000 plantation workers stopped work demanding shorter working hours. On August 30, the ruling coalition announced that it would take strict action against any move to "undermine country's economy."

The RCL responded by issuing a statement in August 1972 declaring: "The main issue in this [working-class] militancy is the inability to resolve any problems of the working class without defeating capitalist rule—that is, no single right of the working class can be defended without bringing a government of workers and peasants to power."

The LSSP (R) refused to mobilise the industrial strength of its unions to defend the striking workers. Its leader, Bala Tampoe, appealed to the government for "effective" talks with the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) and other unions, even as it was moving to crush the strike. The RCL opposed the LSSP (R) and won a significant following amongst bank workers.

Encouraged by the treachery of the LSSP (R), the government used essential services orders to sack striking irrigation technical officers and illegalised the plantation strike. LSSP leader and finance minister, N.M. Perera, broke the 108-day bank strike by sacking all state bank employees.

The RCL took a principled stand against the new communal constitution and upheld the democratic rights of Tamils. The Government Printers Union, at the initiative of RCL members who were in the union's leadership, passed a resolution denouncing the new constitution. The LSSP reacted by expelling the printers union from its Government Workers Federation, but was forced to back down when the RCL campaigned against the decision.

The coalition government responded to the oil price shocks and recession by attacking the living conditions of workers and the rural masses. Finance Minister Perera rigidly regulated economic activity through import controls, a wage freeze, and limits on the distribution of essential items, such as rice, sugar and flour. In the plantations, workers faced rampant unemployment and underemployment, and hundreds of deaths through starvation were reported.

As unrest developed, the LSSP and CPSL trade unions launched a bogus "28 demands movement" that made futile appeals to the very government of which these parties were part. When the LSSP announced a demonstration in Colombo on November 16, 1974, Prime Minister Bandaranaike, who was in Moscow at the time, imposed a curfew and banned the protest. SLFP and UNP thugs beat up LSSP union leaders. Others were arrested by police.

Amid sharp differences in the ruling coalition over economic policy, Bandaranaike dismissed LSSP ministers from her cabinet in September 1975 and took the first steps towards opening up Sri Lanka to foreign investment. The LSSP leaders criticised Bandaranaike, but their speeches were an indictment of their claims a decade earlier that the SLFP was moving in a socialist direction. The LSSP quit the government, but the Stalinist CPSL clung to the coalition until 1977.

The RCL carefully analyzed the intense political crisis and intervened in the growing movement of the working class by calling for the overthrow of the coalition government and the establishment a workers' and peasants' government.

As a result, the RCL won strong support among workers, youth and the rural poor who saw it as the only party fighting for socialism. It was able to establish significant factions amongst workers in the railways, banks, the central bank, the education sector and at the Thulhiriya textile factory, as well as Tamil workers in the island's north, including at the Ceynor factory.

Such were the concerns in ruling circles that Bandaranaike publicly attacked the RCL as a "terrorist" organisation in a parliamentary speech on November 26, 1975. The RCL countered the government's attempted witch-hunt by launching a public campaign under the slogan "Hands off the RCL."

The government tried to sabotage RCL influence in workplaces. In March 1976, it sacked 22 union activists, including seven RCL members, for leading a strike at the Thulhiriya textile factory. However, a vigorous RCL campaign forced the government to reinstate all the dismissed unionists.

The upsurge in strikes reached a crescendo in December 1976 when a stoppage at the Ratmalana railway workshops quickly spread to other public sectors and developed into a general strike. The LSSP, CPSL, LSSP (R) and the trade unions played the critical role in saving the government by blocking the RCL's struggle to develop this determined offensive of the working class into a political struggle for power.

The general strike was defeated but such was the hostility to the coalition government that it was ousted in the 1977 elections. The betrayal of the general strike by the LSSP, CPSL and LSSP (R) enabled the right-wing UNP under the leadership of J.R. Jayawardene to come to office with a five-sixths parliamentary majority. So reviled was the LSSP that it lost all of its seats.

The next four decades thoroughly confirmed the correctness of the RCL's fight against the coalition politics of the LSSP.

The Jayawardene government dumped the previous policies of national economic regulation and enabled international finance capital to transform Sri Lanka into a cheap labor platform. This was part of a global counter-offensive against the working class following the upheavals of 1968–75. Sri Lanka was among the first in the world to carry out the agenda of free-market restructuring, privatisation and the destruction of social services.

The UNP also accelerated the destruction of democratic rights through a new constitution in 1978 that established an executive presidency with sweeping powers. In 1980, the government, relying on the perfidy of the LSSP, CPSL and LSSP (R), sacked 100,000 public sector workers who were striking for decent wages. The UNP's anti-Tamil provocations culminated in a bloody pogrom in 1983 that triggered the island's protracted civil war.

The degeneration of the LSSP accelerated in wake of the 1977 defeat. It adapted to the Jayawardene government, helped it suppress the struggles of the working class and supported the communal war throughout. Today the LSSP is an empty shell with no significant base in the working class. The party that once had a mass following in the working class today functions as little more than a faction of the bourgeois SLFP.

The LSSP (R) and RWP disintegrated without a trace. While these parties opposed the LSSP's betrayal in 1964, they did not break with the Pabloite United Secretariat and its opportunist politics. Following the LSSP's catastrophic election defeat in 1977, a grouping of LSSP leaders broke away to found the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) in 1978, which was soon enlisted by the United Secretariat as its Sri Lankan section.

The NSSP leaders, who had remained in the LSSP throughout all of its treacherous twists and turns, never broke with the politics of coalitionism—that is, of class collaboration. During the past 40 years, the NSSP has allied itself at different periods with the SLFP, the JVP and is currently a mouthpiece for the right-wing UNP.

Colombo is currently wracked by an acute political crisis amid

continuing bitter infighting the UNP and its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, on the one hand, and President Maithripala and former President Mahinda Rajapakse and a splintered SLFP on the other. All of the so-called “left” groupings—the LSSP, the NSSP and the NSSP-breakaway, the United Socialist Party—have aligned themselves, directly or indirectly, with one or other of these two right-wing, bourgeois parties, which are both committed to imposing the IMF’s austerity agenda on workers and the poor.

Workers and youth need to draw the necessary political lessons from the bitter strategic experiences of the past period and make a complete break with the disastrous politics of class collaborationism. The only means for defending even the most basic democratic and social rights is through the independent political mobilisation of the working class, at the head of rural masses, in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

The RCL/SEP, the Sri Lankan section of International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only party that has consistently fought for these principles, having drawn the necessary conclusions from LSSP’s betrayal in 1964.

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