

The lessons of the 1953 mass uprising (hartal) in Sri Lanka

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2 September 2020

A mass semi-insurrectionary uprising, popularly known as the “hartal” (a strike coupled with a general stoppage of work and small businesses), erupted in Sri Lanka 67 years ago on August 12, 1953. It shook the ruling class of the island to the core and marked a political turning point.

Lacking a genuine revolutionary leadership, that is a Marxist-Trotskyist party, the uprising was defeated by the right-wing United National Party (UNP) government. This bitter experience has powerful lessons today for the working class in preparing for its revolutionary struggles ahead.

Internationally, the year 1953 was tumultuous. Workers’ uprisings erupted in East Germany and Czechoslovakia in June against the Stalinist governments installed by the Soviet bureaucracy. Then in August came a near two week-long general strike of four million French workers against austerity measures.

Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) suffered an economic crisis. Rubber and tea exports fell sharply because of the end of a boom created by the three-year bloody Korean War begun in 1950 by the US imperialism.

The UNP government, which came to power just a year earlier with a convincing majority, took ruthless steps in July 1953. It removed the subsidy for rice, the country’s staple food, increasing the price three-fold. It also raised the prices of essential commodities such as sugar, withdrew the midday meal for school children and slashed expenditure on health and other social programs, while increasing charges on railway transport and postal, telephone and telegraphic services.

Finance Minister J. R. Jayewardene said the government had to remove the food subsidy “because it could not find the money to finance the country’s development program.” He cynically told the poor: “Grow your own food.” At the same time, he announced tax concessions and other handouts to the rich

The unbearable inroads into living conditions ignited discontent among workers and the rural poor, which had been simmering for years. In 1948, the ruling elite, long servile to British colonial rule, had supported formal independence in order to quell the struggles of the working people for improved social and living conditions.

Just after this “independence,” the UNP government abolished the citizenship of hundreds of thousands of Indian-origin plantation workers. It was a cynical step calculated to divide the working class along ethnic lines and thus prop up capitalist rule.

On July 23, 1953, as mass opposition brewed against the government’s austerity measures, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party

(LSSP), which commanded considerable support among workers and in rural areas, announced a one-day protest on August 12.

The Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and the Viplavakari Sama Samaja Party (VLSSP), a right-wing nationalist group that had split from the LSSP, joined the campaign.

Seeking to exploit the unrest, the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) condemned the government’s repression but did not support the protest. The SLFP had been formed in 1951 in a split from the UNP led by S.W. R. D. Bandaranaike, in a bid to head off the rising disaffection. The Illankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi, or Federal Party, of the Tamil capitalist elite expressed support for the protest but also did not participate.

On August 12, workers, peasants and youth took matters into their own hands. To counter the police, they built barricades to block each entrance to the capital Colombo. At one barricade across the road close to the Kirullapone Bridge, people battled against 80 police constables.

Wires were cut, blocking telegraph, telephone and other communication links between Colombo and other regions. In some places, wooden bridges were dismantled and other small bridges were blasted with dynamite. Transport and postal services were stopped. Some railway tracks were torn up for a mile or so and some trains were stopped and seized.

The terrified UNP cabinet met on board the British warship, the HMS Newfoundland, anchored in Colombo’s port. It declared an emergency, called out the military with orders to shoot at sight, sealed the offices and presses of working-class parties, imposed a curfew and introduced capital punishment for damaging property.

Police shot dead nine workers and youth in Colombo and the southern and western rural areas, and seriously wounded another 175 protesters.

Though the protest was called for one day, in some areas the demonstrations continued, especially in the Colombo suburbs and southern areas, despite the LSSP’s call for a halt.

The LSSP organised no action nor did it call for the building of defence committees. Nevertheless, the protests erupted in areas where the Trotskyist movement had been active during the previous decade. At the time, the LSSP was the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist party, but had been increasingly orienting toward parliamentarianism and trade unionism around limited economic demands.

The Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI) had been established in 1942 as a section of the Fourth International and

fought for a Trotskyist program across the Indian sub-continent, including Ceylon. However, an opportunist faction led by N. M. Perera and Phillip Gunawardena broke from the BLPI and reverted to a nationalist program, under the banner of the LSSP, in the mid-1940s.

In 1950, the BLPI merged with the LSSP, sweeping aside the all-important political issues of the split. The BLPI's section in India had earlier merged with the nationalist Socialist Party of India. These mergers amounted to liquidating the BLPI. This was an adaptation to the post-World War II settlements between the imperialist powers and the Soviet regime to head off working-class uprisings that included British imperialism's grant of formal independence to Sri Lanka.

In the ensuing years, the LSSP further drifted away from Trotskyism, joining the revisionist tendency of Michael Pablo and Ernest Mandel that had emerged in the Fourth International. This tendency attributed a progressive role to the Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy and abandoned the Trotskyist program of building independent revolutionary parties. In the semi-colonial countries, they proposed fusing sections of the Fourth International with bourgeois nationalist movements.

The LSSP opposed the Open Letter issued by the American Trotskyist leader, James P. Cannon, in November 1953 calling for the rejection of this liquidationism, and refused to join the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to fight Pabloism. Despite having criticised Pablo, it remained with the Pabloite International Secretariat.

The LSSP's nationalist drift was expressed in its role in the 1953 hartal. As *The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)* explains:

“Subsequent LSSP mythology has seized on the 1953 hartal to demonstrate the party's revolutionary character. In reality, the LSSP provided no leadership to the mass movement... In a lengthy article, Colvin R. de Silva declared the hartal to be a ‘new stage of the class struggle that bore the imprint of workers’ and peasants’ alliance.’ But he concluded that the fight was now ‘to compel the UNP government to hold a fresh general election.’ The LSSP all along viewed the hartal as nothing more than an adjunct to its parliamentary manoeuvring.” [page 58]

While the LSSP proposed parliamentary activities, the intensity of the struggle shocked significant sections of the ruling elite. They threw their support behind Bandaranaike's SLFP, as an alternative capitalist party to the UNP. Bandaranaike's “Sinhala Only” policy proposed Sinhala as the official language, fomenting anti-Tamil communalism to divide the working class that has been expressed in the class unity during the hartal.

The LSSP's betrayal of the mass struggle paved the way for the SLFP to take office in the 1956 parliamentary election. Far from drawing a revolutionary lesson from the hartal or self-critically analysing the event, the LSSP was politically backslided rapidly.

In fact, the LSSP entered a “no-contest” pact with the SLFP during the 1956 election and adopted a stance of “non-responsive co-operation” toward the SLFP government, voting for its throne speech in parliament in 1956 and 1957. The leader of the VLSSP, Philip Gunawardana, entered the SLFP government as a cabinet minister.

Internationally, the Pabloites covered up the LSSP's backsliding, creating the conditions for the great betrayal of 1964, when the LSSP, faced by another working-class upsurge, entered Sirima Bandaranaike's SLFP-led coalition government. By that act, the LSSP finally completely abandoned international socialist principles, accepting ministerial posts in a capitalist government to help suppress the struggles of the working class.

The horrific conditions faced by workers and the rural poor ever since, including decades of anti-Tamil communalism and civil war, are a consequence of this historic betrayal.

The working class needs to draw the lessons from the 1953 hartal in the context of the unfolding crisis of global capitalism today and its sharp expression in Sri Lanka. The COVID-19 pandemic has given a new impetus to the worldwide class struggle, in which the assimilation of the lessons of the past will be crucial.

First and foremost, the hartal showed that whatever the courage, fearlessness and militancy of workers, that alone is not adequate for the working class to take power. It needs a revolutionary party based on the program of international socialism and a thorough assimilation of all of the historic experiences of the working class internationally, including in Sri Lanka, of the LSSP's degeneration and betrayal.

Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution provides the essential basis for the impending revolutionary struggles. It established that in countries with a belated capitalist development, only the working class can address the democratic tasks and social questions by taking the leadership of the rural poor and oppressed to carry through a socialist revolution. That means building the ICFI and its sections, the Socialist Equality Parties.

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