

A socialist answer to the danger of war in Sri Lanka

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Every time a new Sri Lankan president is elected, it is customary to promise “a new approach” will be undertaken to solve all political and social evils. When Mahinda Rajapakse narrowly won the election in November, he pledged to immediately implement his grand plan—*Mahinda Chinthana* or Mahinda’s Vision. More than 100 days into Rajapakse’s rule, however, the situation in Sri Lanka has taken a drastic turn for the worse.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned in its election manifesto: “Rajapakse is backed by layers of the state bureaucracy, military, Buddhist hierarchy and business whose interests are bound up with the maintenance of Sinhala supremacy and opposed to any concession to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or the country’s Tamil minority. He has allied himself with the Sinhala extremists of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), who are demanding the strengthening of the military, a revision of the current ceasefire and the abandonment of the P-TOMS agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam for the joint administration of tsunami aid. The logic of these policies is to set the course for war.”

It is no secret now, given all the developments of the past three and a half months, that our prediction has been totally vindicated on this central and burning issue confronting working people throughout the island. The country has been driven to the brink of war—all that is missing is an official declaration.

In the first two months of the Rajapakse presidency, abductions and killings by both sides resulted in a staggering 200 deaths, more than three a day. The past month has seen a relative lull in bloody incidents as the government and the LTTE agreed to talks in Geneva. However, barely had the two parties issued a joint statement declaring their commitment to upholding the 2002 ceasefire than tensions rose again.

The JVP and JHU, with the military commander joining in, have denounced the ceasefire and called into question the validity of the joint statement in Geneva, which they insist is unconstitutional and a betrayal of the sovereignty of the Sri Lankan state. In the war zones of the North and East, the killing spree is already beginning again.

These latest developments are not an aberration, but a continuation of the political crisis of the past two decades. Time and again, the ruling class has proven organically incapable of securing an end to the war that satisfies the aspirations of the vast majority of the population—Sinhala and Tamil, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist—for peace, decent living and basic democratic rights.

The imperialist “peace process”

For working people, who desperately want an end to the interminable fratricidal bloodletting, there are two important and interrelated issues.

The first is the futility of relying on the so-called “international community” or, to put it properly, the imperialist powers, to find a settlement to the war. As the SEP has repeatedly pointed out, the internationally promoted “peace process” is a fatal illusion that is pushed by all the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois proponents of “peace” to disorient and politically disarm the working class.

It was these same global powers that were principally responsible for creating the conditions for civil war by demanding economic restructuring in late 1970s. The implementation of that program, which meant the dismantling of the post-independence, nationally-regulated economy, inevitably provoked resistance by the working class. The Colombo ruling elite responded as it had on every previous occasion—by stoking up anti-Tamil communalism and strengthening the state machinery to divide and suppress workers.

As far as the “international community” was concerned, the civil war that erupted in 1983 achieved its objective by making the island one of the first exponents of free market reform. The total silence of the major powers for almost a decade and a half, as tens of thousands died, can only be understood on that basis.

The shift in the late 1990s to the “peace process” was not out of any concern for the working people whose lives were devastated by the war. As global patterns of production became more dominant and India assumed greater importance in the 1990s as a cheap labour platform, investors began to see the civil war in Sri Lanka as a threat to regional stability that had to be ended. Colombo governments came under growing international pressure to reach a powersharing deal with the LTTE and to turn the island into a stable cheap labour base for foreign investors.

Imperialist “peace making,” whether it is in Sri Lanka, Kashmir, the Indonesia province of Aceh or the Middle East, is not about peace as such. It is simply a tactic—one of the methods used by the major powers to impose their predatory designs. The real face of imperialism is nakedly revealed in the neo-colonial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq by the US and its allies.

The switch from the peace tactic to war can be very rapid. In the midst of Washington’s efforts to bully the LTTE to the peace table in January, the US ambassador in Colombo, Jeffrey Lunstead, issued a chilling threat. If the LTTE chose the path of war, he declared, it will be “confronted by a formidable military”, trained and equipped by the US. The words have the same aggressive ring as those used against the Iraqi regime prior to the illegal US-led invasion in 2003.

Working people cannot leave peace in Sri Lanka in the hands of these gangsters. Genuine peace is indissolubly connected to the struggle for social equality and democratic rights for people of all communities throughout the island. In a struggle to achieve these basic aims, working people will quickly find that their greatest enemies are the present promoters of the peace process in Washington, Tokyo and the European capitals.

The SEP calls on working people to turn to the only progressive social force in the world capable to fighting imperialism—the international working class. An appeal by workers in Sri Lanka fighting for peace, democracy and decent living standards, even though from a small and historically backward country, would be a powerful catalyst for a mass anti-imperialist movement by millions of working people throughout the globe who despise imperialist aggression and the impact of global capitalism’s regressive economic policies.

Political independence of the working class

The second vital issue that workers have to address is the need for an independent political program and leadership that meets their historic interests, not those of their class oppressors.

The incapacity of all Colombo governments, whatever their political complexion, to arrive at a peace agreement based on a real resolution of the issues that led to the war, arises from the communal politics practised by all factions of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. From the very outset, the ruling classes, fearful of the workers' movement and its capacity to draw in the peasant masses, have played the race card.

“Divide and rule,” the watchword of the British Raj, has been the guiding principle of every bourgeois party following formal independence in South Asia after 1947-48. The ruling elites in India and Pakistan sanctioned the partition of the subcontinent and the communal bloodbath that followed. In Sri Lanka, citizenship was decided on communal grounds and more than a million Tamil-speaking plantation workers lost all their rights in 1948.

Anti-Tamil discrimination was entrenched on the island through the Sinhala-only official language act and the 1972 constitution that made Buddhism the state religion. Every time Tamils sought concessions from the government, the party in opposition—whether the UNP or SLFP—stirred up communal objections. When Tamils protested for their rights, they were confronted with ferocious state repression. In 1983, state-sponsored racist thugs, backed by the military and police, went on a rampage, killing hundreds of Tamils, burning their homes and businesses and displacing nearly a million people. That pogrom signalled the beginning of the civil war.

These disasters, above all the war, could have been prevented by the working class through the building of a powerful independent movement based on socialist policies to win the rural and urban poor to its side. The chief obstacle was the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which had fought for the principles of socialist internationalism in the 1940s and 1950s, but increasingly adapted to the communal politics of the ruling class. In 1964, it openly betrayed the working class by joining the bourgeois SLFP government of Sirima Bandaranaike.

The same wretched politics of class collaboration has been practised by the Nava Sama Samaja Party, Democratic Left Front and United Socialist Party—splinter groups that broke from the LSSP but not its outlook. While posturing as “socialists” and spouting radical phrases, these middle class pretenders are organically hostile to any step by the working class to assert its political independence. In every crucial political crisis, these opportunists have joined hands with the ruling elite and helped salvage bourgeois rule.

The leaders of these parties supported the 1987 Indo-Lanka accord that brought Indian “peace keepers” to crush the Tamil struggle in the north and allowed the Sri Lankan military to massacre tens of thousands of Sinhala youth in rural south. After the 1994 elections, the same parties supported President Chandrika Kumaratunga as she paraded as a “peacemaker” then rapidly jettisoned her plans and launched a savage “war for peace”. Since 2002, they have been the most ardent supporters of the imperialist “peace process”, whether under the UNP, President Kumaratunga or now President Rajapakse.

Notwithstanding the crude political illusions peddled by these “peace” parties, the balance sheet of the past 60 years, particularly the past four years of failed peace negotiations, demonstrates that neither peace nor a democratic solution to the Tamil problem can be achieved within the framework of capitalist rule. All the various peace plans drawn up with the backing of the major powers to end the war, have only intensified communal tensions and conflict.

This communal quagmire, combined with deteriorating economic conditions, has provided the breeding ground for extreme chauvinist parties such as JVP and JHU that prey on the despair and frustrations of more backward and oppressed layers of the population. Far from offering any solution to the deepening social crisis, their campaign for “an honourable peace” is in reality a call for a return to war and the crushing of the LTTE. These parties pose a grave threat not only to the Tamils but to the working class as a whole.

The socialist alternative

The catastrophe that threatens the island can and must be averted. To end the war and establish harmonious social conditions for all communities requires the abolition of the profit system that is responsible for social inequality, communalism and war. The SEP advances a program for the working class to take the political initiative to achieve that objective.

We call on the working class to initiate a campaign for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Sri Lankan security forces from the North and East. The tens of thousands of soldiers and police in these areas function as an army of occupation that is despised and hated by the Tamil population for its systematic persecution, arbitrary arrests, torture and killings. The demand for an end to this oppression is an essential precondition for an end to the war and serves as a powerful pole of attraction for all those who want peace and to defend basic democratic rights.

“Withdrawal of the troops means victory for the LTTE terrorists, a separate Eelam and a divided nation,” scream the Sinhala chauvinists, seeking to whip up fear and panic. “On the contrary,” the SEP replies. “It is the only basis for establishing a joint struggle of the Sinhala and Tamil working people against the ruling elites of both communities. We do not support the Sri Lankan bourgeois state artificially unified by brute force. We are fighting for the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam based on the unification of the working class.”

It is the absence of an independent movement of the working class that has left the door open for the LTTE, which represents the interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not the Tamil masses. Its demand for a separate capitalist statelet in the North and East is a dangerous political trap for the Tamil working class. Nothing will strengthen the hand of Tamil workers and peasants more in their struggle against the LTTE’s thuggery and exploitation than the emergence of a political movement throughout the island for the end of the military occupation of the North and East.

In the aftermath of the tsunami disaster in December 2004, ordinary working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—brushed aside the filthy communal politics that is constantly promoted and spontaneously came together to help each other out. It is the main reason why President Kumaratunga imposed a state of emergency and placed the military in charge of her government’s paltry relief efforts. The ruling elites were terrified of a unified movement of working people. That experience revealed in an embryonic form the potential that exists for a common struggle by the working class for the democratic and social rights of all.

To resolve all the long outstanding issues of democratic rights and to end all forms of discrimination, the SEP insists that a new constitution is needed. But the drafting of the constitution must be done democratically. Unlike in 1972 and 1978, when the existing parliaments fraudulently turned themselves into constituent assemblies, a new constitution must be drafted and adopted by a genuine constituent assembly, democratically elected by working people for that specific purpose.

Genuine democracy means more than the formal equality of the bourgeois legal system and parliamentary elections, which always favour the rich and privileged. The economic foundation of society must be transformed to serve the interests of the broad masses of the working people. That is why the SEP advocates a socialist program to place all the major financial, industrial and trading enterprises under democratic, public ownership and control to meet the needs of the vast majority of society, not the profits of the wealthy few.

Socialism cannot be achieved on a single, small island in South Asia, nor indeed in any isolated nation, large or small. The struggle for socialism is necessarily international. The only alternative to the predatory activities of global capitalism is a unified international counteroffensive by the working class to refashion society along socialist lines. The struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam is only a component of the wider struggle for a United Socialist States of South Asia and internationally. This is the program fought for by all the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) through the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The SEP, founded as the Revolutionary Communist League in 1968, is the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, which has consistently championed the democratic and social rights of the working class and the oppressed people. We call on all those who aspire to peace and oppose the assault on democratic and social rights to read the WSWWS and to join and build the SEP and the ICFI.
