

The NSSP refuses to defend Sri Lankan socialists

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which postures in Sri Lanka as a socialist, and at times even Trotskyist, organisation has refused to support the campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) against death threats and a violent attack, against SEP members on Kayts Island by local officials of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The SEP wrote to the NSSP on October 14 to seek a statement opposing the LTTE's threats against the SEP and the physical attack on SEP member Nagaraja Kodeswaran. When no reply was received, the SEP contacted NSSP leader Wickramabahu Karunaratna by phone on October 30. His initial reaction was to declare that he could not issue letters offhand and would have to verify what actually took place.

Details of the LTTE's threats had been posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* since early October. In September, Semmanan, the LTTE area leader on Kayts, and his deputy threatened to mete out the "proper medicine" to SEP members after they opposed the LTTE's demands for a local fishermen's union to hand over funds to build an LTTE area office. What was meant by "proper medicine" was indicated by a reference to the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991.

On October 8, an LTTE member attacked Kodeswaran causing serious injuries to his neck, head and shoulders. The SEP member was hospitalised in Jaffna for four days. As a result of the SEP's campaign, police eventually charged a man with assault and the court case began on December 4. The details are readily available to the NSSP.

However, Karunaratna's next remarks on the phone made clear why the NSSP is not prepared to defend the SEP's democratic rights. Justifying the physical attack on Kodeswaran, he stated: "If anyone shouts against the devolution arrangement [between the Colombo government and the LTTE], they are certain to be assaulted... Whether political work is allowed in that region depends on what politicians say. Just because they shout about socialism or revolution does not mean they should be allowed to carry out their political work."

Karunaratna's comments confirm that the NSSP has refused to condemn the LTTE's actions because to do so would cut across its uncritical support for what is the central agenda of the major powers and big business in Sri Lanka: the current negotiations between the Colombo government and the LTTE over a power-sharing or devolution deal to end the country's long-running war.

The character of the arrangement hammered out at the talks was highlighted in a comment by the LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham who declared that his organisation wanted to work with Colombo to turn Sri Lanka into a "tiger economy"—that is, to offer it

as a source of cheap labour for investors. Both sides see the opportunity to use the desire for peace on the part of the Tamil and Sinhala masses to impose a deal that will deepen their economic exploitation. At the same time as they thrash out a deal, Colombo and the LTTE are concerned at any resistance from the working class to their plans, particularly the conscious opposition of socialists.

The United National Front (UNF) government is already notorious for branding each and every struggle of the workers and rural poor as attempts to disrupt the peace process. The LTTE's antagonism to any opposition from the Tamil masses has been laid bare by its refusal to discipline its local officials on Kayts and to disown their methods of extortion and thuggery. LTTE negotiator Balasingham has declared that the LTTE will respect the democratic rights of other parties in areas under its control, but it is not prepared to guarantee the SEP's freedom to conduct its political work.

Despite its support for the so-called peace process, the NSSP could have defended the SEP's right to oppose it. But Karunaratna's justification for the LTTE's physical attack makes clear that the party has lined up with the primary objective of the UNF government, the LTTE, big business and the major powers to suppress any criticism. By saying that those who "shout about socialism or revolution" should not be permitted to conduct political work, Karunaratna is declaring the NSSP's willingness to support repression not only against the SEP but against those workers and rural poor who oppose the consequences of any settlement.

The SEP sought to clarify Karunaratna's telephone remarks in a letter on November 6, which again urged him to support the campaign to oppose the LTTE's actions and defend the party's rights. The SEP has received no reply or any indication that the NSSP has attempted to verify the events that took place on Kayts. In a further phone call on December 12, Karunaratna claimed his remarks were misrepresented but refused to say how and rapidly ended the conversation by hanging up. One can only conclude that the NSSP stands by its defence of the LTTE's assault.

The NSSP's stance is the product of a long history of opportunist manoeuvring. The party was formed by a faction that broke with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), not in 1964 when the LSSP betrayed the fundamental principles of Trotskyism by joining the bourgeois government of Mme Bandaranaike, but some 14 years later, in 1978.

The NSSP's founders, including Wickramabahu Karunaratna, remained in the LSSP even as its leaders were part of the second Bandaranaike administration. The LSSP's ministers supported the suppression of an uprising of rural youth led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1971, the imposition of a communal constitution

in 1972 that enshrined Buddhism as the state religion and a series of discriminatory measures against the country's Tamil minority. The Karunaratna faction only broke with the LSSP after the deeply unpopular government lost office in 1977.

From the outset, the NSSP's orientation was never to the working class. The LSSP's betrayal in 1964 had led directly to the growth of middle class radical tendencies based on communal politics—the JVP attracted alienated Sinhala youth in the south based on a mixture of Maoism and Sinhala chauvinism, and various separatist organisations, including the LTTE, emerged among young Tamils. The NSSP manoeuvred among these groups, without opposing or criticising their racialist politics.

At the same time, the NSSP never broke with the popular front politics that had led the LSSP into the Bandaranaike government. In 1983, Bandaranaike's daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga, and her husband, the popular actor Vijaya Kumaratunga, broke from her mother's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) to form the Sri Lanka Mahajanana Party (SLMP). The NSSP immediately hailed this new bourgeois formation as the main party of the working class and urged the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party to join a front with the SLMP called the United Socialist Alliance.

In 1987, the NSSP supported another "peace process" initiated by the conservative United National Party (UNP), which faced mounting opposition from workers and peasants over its free market policies and the war. The NSSP attended an All-Party Conference called by President Jayawardene that gave the green light for the government to sign a deal with India—the Indo-Lanka Accord—to send a large peace-keeping force to northern Sri Lanka.

The real purpose of the Indian peacekeepers was to suppress the resistance of Tamils in the north so as to free the hand of the Sri Lankan security forces to crush the opposition of the working class in the south. Thousands of innocent Tamils were killed as fighting broke out with the LTTE, which had initially backed the Accord. In the south, the JVP, backed by sections of the SLFP, denounced the Accord as a betrayal of the Sinhala nation and launched fascist attacks on workers and organisations that refused to back its chauvinist crusade—a campaign that dovetailed with the UNP government's own aims.

The JVP murdered hundreds of workers, trade union officials and party leaders. Even though its own members were being hunted, the NSSP refused to join the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP's forerunner, in forming a united front of working class parties to take concrete measures to defeat the JVP's fascist gangs. Instead, the NSSP branded the RCL as sectarian for not joining its opportunist alliance with the SLMP, which it claimed was opposing JVP and state repression.

The value of the NSSP's alliance with the SLMP was quickly exposed. Having exploited the JVP's campaign for its own purposes, the UNP government of President Premadasa turned on the organisation. In the name of dealing with JVP violence, the government, with the support of the SLMP, carried out a far-reaching terror campaign against rural youth in the south—more than 100,000 were either murdered or "disappeared" in the space of a few months in 1989.

The NSSP continued to back Kumaratunga when she rejoined the SLFP. During the 1994 election campaign, the NSSP supported Kumaratunga and her Peoples Alliance (PA), claiming she would bring peace and end the pro-IMF policies of the UNP. Having won office, Kumaratunga held negotiations with the LTTE but rapidly

broke them off and intensified the war.

As opposition to the PA government grew, the NSSP began looking in other directions—toward the JVP, which, supported by Kumaratunga and sections of business, was seeking to enter the political mainstream. The NSSP provided a political helping hand by playing down the JVP's Sinhala extremism and promoting it as a socialist organisation. Karunaratna even excused the fact that just a decade before the JVP had attempted to kill him and other NSSP leaders. At the same time, the NSSP supported the LTTE and its program of Tamil separatism.

The common thread in all of these extraordinary political somersaults is the NSSP's organic hostility to an independent perspective for the working class—Tamil and Sinhala alike. In every political crisis, the NSSP has served as the apologist for one or other of the major bourgeois parties and thus acted as a crucial political safety valve to prevent the mobilisation of workers to defend their own class interests.

Events have now come full circle. The PA was defeated at last year's election by a UNP-led coalition proclaiming that it stood for peace. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe signed a ceasefire with the LTTE and negotiations have begun for a political settlement to the war. The JVP, with the backing of sections of the PA and other chauvinist organisations, is accusing Wickremesinghe of preparing to betray the Sinhala nation and divide the island.

Where does the NSSP stand now? The party has rediscovered the JVP's Sinhala chauvinism and distanced itself from its former ally, as well as from the PA and Kumaratunga. The NSSP uncritically supports the UNP and the so-called peace process. In recent weeks, Karunaratna has been featured on various TV shows as a defender of the negotiations, against the criticisms of the JVP, Kumaratunga and others.

In backing Wickremesinghe, the NSSP is engaged in another political swindle. There is no doubt that a majority of the population wants an end to the 19-year civil war, which has cost the lives of an estimated 60,000 people. But the imperialist powers and the capitalist class in Sri Lanka are seeking to exploit this sentiment to impose a settlement in their own interests. The regional autonomy being discussed will entrench communal divisions and keep the working class divided as the demands of the IMF for privatisation, cutbacks to government spending and job cuts are imposed.

As they seek to cement this power-sharing arrangement, the government and the LTTE recognise that the chief danger lies in the opposition of the working class, which finds its most conscious expression in the socialist program of the SEP. That is why the NSSP has refused to condemn the LTTE's assault on SEP members on Kayts Island.



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