

Wigneswaran's Tamil People's Alliance: A trap for Sri Lankan workers

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On October 24, former Northern Provincial Council (NPC) Chief Minister C. V. Wigneswaran announced the launch of a new party, the Tamil People's Alliance (TPA). This came barely two weeks after David North, the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), gave public lectures held by the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) and media interviews that attracted broad interest in Sri Lanka.

Wigneswaran's decision to contribute yet again to the alphabet soup of Tamil nationalist groupings in Sri Lanka is in part a response to the growing influence of the SEP. A section of the Tamil bourgeoisie is setting a trap for the growing movement of workers and youth in Sri Lanka, aiming to divide them along ethnic and religious lines. Aware of the discrediting of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), Wigneswaran is trying to set up a party that will pursue the same pro-imperialist and pro-austerity politics as the TNA, but hide itself behind a new name.

In his inauguration speech, Wigneswaran defined a 10-point program to promote "people's politics." However, he indicated that he would continue the policies of the TNA, which has tried to negotiate an improvement of conditions for Tamils in the aftermath of the 1983-2009 Sri Lankan civil war with the US-backed government of President Maithripala Sirisena. Wigneswaran said, "Negotiations with the government to solve the ethnic conflict are halted. In order to restart the negotiations, we must again start to exercise pressures nationally and internationally."

Only two days later, however, Wigneswaran's perspective of negotiating with a friendly government in Colombo went up in smoke. Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in a political coup that has plunged Sri Lanka into a constitutional crisis.

Sirisena nominated as prime minister former President Mahinda Rajapakse, who oversaw the crushing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the massacre of thousands of civilians as the war ended in 2009.

Since then, Wigneswaran has maintained a deafening silence as to what the TPA will do. The Tamil nationalist groups oppose a struggle to unify Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in Sri Lanka on a socialist perspective. They are terrified by the wave of strikes and protests by industrial and plantation workers, and youth in Sri Lanka and India, and the growth of socialist sentiment.

Wigneswaran's 10-point program does not differ in any significant way from that of the TNA. He proposes nothing besides talks with Colombo, mediated by the "international community," to release Tamil political prisoners held since the end of the civil war, to find the whereabouts of the missing, and to obtain the release of private lands occupied by the army.

While the SEP ceaselessly fought to unify workers in struggle against the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, the TNA backed Sirisena. It is also clear that the TNA is not unfriendly to the TPA initiative. TNA leader Sampanthan refused to comment on the TPA's formation, claiming he had not had time to read Wigneswaran's speech. However, TNA official M. A. Sumanthiran said that if Wigneswaran worked to unite all the Tamil parties and diaspora organizations, the TNA could "happily accept" his leading role.

Wigneswaran's own criticisms of the TNA are entirely tactical, reflecting Wigneswaran's own pro-imperialist and anti-worker perspective. He has complained that the TNA is ineffective in its dealings with the "international community," that is to say primarily Washington. He backed the TNA even after

its 2016 vote to support Sirisena's IMF austerity budget, the first time in the history of Sri Lankan politics that an opposition party had voted to support the budget.

As former chief judge in the Sri Lankan state apparatus, he is a law-and-order man promoting conservative Hindu values, opening his speeches by reciting Sanskrit mantras. He called on Sirisena to grant Tamil diaspora businesses special access to cheap labor in the military-occupied Tamil areas of northern Sri Lanka. Competing with Sinhala racist politicians in the South, he denounced Sinhala workers in racist terms in public meetings: "I am not opposed to Sinhala people, but I am not in agreement with Sinhala construction workers working in the north."

The perspective of Wigneswaran is a dead end for the workers and youth. The four years of the Sirisena government have demonstrated the bankruptcy of the Tamil nationalists. The only way for the Tamil masses to fight their continuing oppression after decades of bloody civil war is a turn towards their class brothers and sisters of other nationalities, and the socialist perspective of the SEP.

The TNA played a key role in the US-engineered regime-change operation in 2015 that installed Sirisena in office, promising he would fulfil democratic demands of the Tamil minority. In the following parliamentary elections, Tamil voters elected 16 TNA members with the expectation of improvements in their living conditions.

TNA completely abandoned these voters, becoming a prop of the Sirisena government, unconditionally supporting the reorientation of its foreign policy towards US imperialism's war preparations against China. The TNA supported the government from the opposition benches, including backing the implementation of IMF-dictated austerity measures against working people.

It abandoned the concerns of the Tamil people: the release of political prisoners, the fate of the thousands of missing people, displaced civilians and homes destroyed during the war. TNA leaders confronted growing popular discontent and anger against Sirisena with cynicism and contempt. Sampanthan, the leader of the opposition, said at one point that he could not find the keys to release Tamil political prisoners in Sri Lanka.

Wigneswaran continually tried to cover up politically for the TNA. Amid growing disquiet with the TNA's collaboration with Sirisena, he took the initiative in December 2015 to form a Tamil People's Forum (TPF) assembling all the Tamil nationalist parties, intellectuals and professionals. Wigneswaran announced the TPA's formation at a meeting of the TPF attended by supporters of the TNA and other Tamil nationalist outfits.

Analysing the TPF's formation at the time, the WSWS wrote: "On December 19, the Tamil Peoples Forum (TPF), a new organisation led by North Province Chief Minister Wigneswaran, was formed. This is a shabby maneuver to give a facelift to the bankrupt politics of Tamil nationalism, even as the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) is ever more discredited by its support for the US-backed government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe."

For workers and youth in Sri Lanka and India entering into struggle, the alternative is a turn to the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its fight for an international socialist perspective.

David North, in his lectures celebrating the 80th anniversary of Leon Trotsky's foundation of the Fourth International and the 50th anniversary of the SEP, outlined the significance of unifying the working class in a Sri Lankan TV interview:

"The basic political foundation for the Fourth International is precisely that it brings to the working class an international strategy. The fight for socialism is not national. It's international. There's no national path. The national path leads inexorably to right wing politics, trade wars trying to line workers up behind their own ruling elites and that is the path to war. So today the alternative is either we have an international socialist policy to unite the working class, or we have the capitalist policy of the struggle between nation states and war."



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