The liquidation of the BLPI and the LSSP's great betrayal in Sri Lanka

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This is the first of four articles on the political lessons of the great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which in June 1964 joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike. For the first time, a party claiming to be Trotskyist entered a bourgeois government—an open repudiation of the fundamental principles of international socialism.

The LSSP's betrayal had a profound significance for the international Trotskyist movement. It confirmed the opportunist character of the political tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel , from which the genuine Trotskyists broke in 1953 to form the International Committee of the Fourth International. At every stage, the Pabloites facilitated and condoned the political downsliding of the LSSP, paving the way for its entry in to the Bandaranaike government.

The first article deals with the establishment of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) in 1942 as a section of Fourth International and its subsequent polit ical liquidation, which was to have serious consequences for the working class throughout Asia and internationally.

The formation of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) in 1942 amid World War II represented an important step forward for the working class throughout the Indian subcontinent. The leaders of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in Ceylon, who initiated the new party, broke from the radical nationalist perspective on which the LSSP had been founded in 1935. They expelled the Stalinists in the ranks of the LSSP who followed the line dictated from Moscow—that the working class had to support the so-called democracies like Britain in the war against Nazi Germany.

The BLPI's draft program affirmed that "this [revolutionary] party of the Fourth International in India" alone, "with its revolutionary strategy based on the accumulated experience of history and the Theory of Permanent Revolution in particular, can lead the working class in India to revolutionary victory." The BLPI, which united Trotskyists in Ceylon and India, insisted on the political independence of working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie, including the Indian National Congress (Congress), the main political representative of the Indian capitalist class.

In opposition to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), the BLPI waged a continuous struggle against the imperialist war and British colonial domination. Shortly after its formation, the BLPI was thrust into the midst of the Quit India movement of August 1942. Initiated by Congress in a bid to extract concessions from Britain, the movement drew hundreds of thousands of youth, workers and peasants into militant struggle against British colonialism. Congress attempted to confine the struggles to impotent "civil disobedience" protests. The CPI bitterly denounced the movement as damaging the war effort, sought to suppress strikes by workers and acted as spies and provocateurs for the British colonial authorities.

The BLPI participated in this mass struggle without making any political concessions to Congress, and denounced the treachery of the Stalinists. It called upon workers and the oppressed to oppose the imperialist war through the fight for socialist revolution. A party leaflet issued in Bombay on August 9, the day the mass struggle broke out, called for intervention of the working class in "a mass general political strike to paralyze and stop the … machinery of imperialist administration." It urged the working class to provide leadership to the insurgent peasant movement with demands "leading to the seizure of land by the peasants through peasants' committees."

The British colonial administration responded with brutal police-state repression, killing around a thousand people and arresting hundreds of thousands, including many BLPI leaders. As the mass upheavals subsided, an opportunist tendency emerged within the BLPI's ranks that was a harbinger of things to come. Writing from jail in 1943, N. M. Perera and Phillip Gunawardena proposed an unprincipled fusion with the Congress Socialist Party (CSP) and several other petty bourgeois groups, claiming that "a powerful left organisation will give a fillip to the revolutionary sentiment throughout the country."

The proposal was a reversion to the middle class radical politics of the LSSP that the CSP also espoused. A BLPI congress in 1944 issued a resolution rejecting the fusion, warning that it would "result in the dissolution of the only party existing in India with a clear-cut revolutionary program and the creation in its place at best a broad centrist party."

The end of the war led to the eruption of revolutionary struggles around the globe, including in the Indian subcontinent against British colonial rule. The BLPI won a significant base among workers in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, giving the lie to the claims of Perera and Gunawardena that the revolutionary party could not reach broad sections of the working class.

Amid these rising class struggles, Congress and the Muslim League, the party of the Muslim elites in India, rapidly moved to work out an arrangement with the British rulers to head off the independence movement. The Stalinist CPI backed these bourgeois parties, and the 1947 partition of British India along communal lines into India and Pakistan. The CSP was shifting further to the right and tacitly supported the Congress deal with the British by abstaining.

The BLPI was alone in opposing the post-war settlement. At a conference in May 1947, the BLPI characterized the India that would emerge as "a semi-colony enjoying political independence, but

subject as before to the economic domination of British imperialist interests …" The resolution warned of the dangers and called on workers to oppose the settlement. Just months later, the partition of India in August 1947 into a Hindu-dominated India and a Muslim Pakistan provoked a communal carnage that resulted in the deaths of around one million people.

The following year, speaking at a Bengali students' meeting, BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva explained "that the British continue to dominate the heights of India's economy, and the seas that wash India shores … Hence, what has taken place in India is not a transition to independence but a switch-over by imperialism from direct to indirect forms of rule via a re-arrangement of its alliance with Indian bourgeoisie."

In Ceylon, Perera and Gunawardena returned after being released from jail in India to pursue the opportunist politics they advocated in 1943. They broke from the BLPI to form their own party, reviving the name of the LSSP. The BLPI condemned their renegacy and warned their split was the "manifestation of a non-proletarian tendency" which, if not checked, would develop "into full-blown opportunist politics."

The political gulf between the Bolshevik Samasamaja Party (BSP), as the BLPI unit in Ceylon was known, and the reformed LSSP became evident as Britain, in league with the local bourgeoisie, moved to grant "independence." The BSP opposed the 1947 Ceylon independence bill, which BSP leader Doric de Souza characterized as a "conspiracy against people." The BSP boycotted the formal handover ceremony in 1948 and mobilized tens of thousands of workers in Colombo in opposition to the "fake independence."

By contrast, the LSSP characterized the British handover as a step forward, abstained on the vote on the independence legislation and denounced the BSP plans for an opposition rally as "exhibitionism." The LSSP had moved rapidly to the right, even agreeing to participate in talks to join a bourgeois coalition government with the Ceylon National Congress leaders, who formed the United National Party (UNP) to take power.

The anti-democratic character of "independence" was soon revealed by one of the first decisions of the new UNP government: to abolish the citizenship and voting rights of around one million Tamil plantation workers. BSP leader Colvin R. de Silva condemned the decision, pointing out that fascism had determined citizenship on the basis of race. He warned that this communal legislation was being used to divide and weaken the working class in order to prop up shaky capitalist rule.

Formal independence in the Indian subcontinent, which coincided with the restabilisation of capitalism internationally under the dominance of US imperialism, placed intense pressures on the BLPI. New opportunities opened up for sections of the local bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie in business, the state apparatus, parliamentary careers and the trade union bureaucracy.

These pressures were quickly reflected in the decision of the BLPI in India to enter the Socialist Party, formed in 1948 by the Congress Socialists, which did not directly oppose the imperialist settlement in India. The BLPI Congress in October 1948 unanimously passed a resolution endorsing the entry—a move that the party had rejected when it was proposed by Perera and Gunawardena in 1943. The BLPI ignored a request made by Michel Pablo on behalf of the International Secretariat of the Fourth International to postpone the entry in order to facilitate a serious discussion.

The decision to enter the Socialist Party had nothing in common with the entry tactic proposed by Leon Trotsky in the 1930s. The Socialist Party was not a left-moving formation, as the advocates of entry maintained. Rather it was moving rapidly to the right. The party leadership stifled internal democracy and thus the ability of BLPI members to fight for revolutionary politics.

It soon became apparent that the BLPI's shift was part of a wider adaptation to pressures on the Fourth International, for which Pablo and Ernest Mandel were to provide the theoretical expression. Succumbing to the pressures of relative post-war stability, Pablo and Mandel abandoned the perspective of international socialism, rejected the building of revolutionary parties and proposed that the sections of the Fourth International enter Stalinist or Social Democratic parties and alliances with bourgeois national organisations.

When in 1950, a section of the BLPI cadre sought to leave the Socialist Party, Pablo advised them to remain where they were. The BLPI's liquidation into the Socialist Party in India was then followed in Sri Lanka by the merger of the BSP with the LSSP at a "unity congress" held on June 4, 1950.

In his *A Short History of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party* written in 1960, LSSP secretary Leslie Gunawardena claimed that "there were absolutely no principled political differences between the two organisations." He pointed to the underlying parliamentary perspective that animated the merger, noting that the rivalry between the BSP and LSSP had enabled the right-wing UNP to win the Gampaha by-election in 1949.

It was false to declare that there were no principled differences. The divide between the BSP and the opportunism of the LSSP was already apparent in the debate over independence and the BSP's opposition to the LSSP's manoeuvres toward sections of the UNP leadership. The BSP leaders simply swept the political differences under the carpet in the name of unity.

As the *Historical and International Foundations of the SEP* (Socialist Equality Party, Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International) explained: "The 'fusion' amounted to a return to Samasamajism, that is, to the national tradition of Sri Lankan radicalism. The failure to discuss these issues demonstrated the real relations in the new party: the right wing headed by N. M. Perera was in charge, while the former BLPI leaders provided him with 'Trotskyist' credentials. Far from intervening to demand a political clarification and to oppose this unprincipled unification, the International Secretariat under Michel Pablo gave its blessing and accepted the LSSP as the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International."