



Guerillarism: a flawed strategy

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Ranged against Jayawardene are the organisations of the Tamils, many of which have taken up the armed struggle. How should revolutionaries assess the role of the guerrilla organisations in the present struggle? What has the last twelve months revealed about their petit bourgeois nationalism?

It is true that Ghandi has exerted pressure on the guerrillas but it is also true that they have conceded to that pressure. There could be no doubt that Rajiv's aim was to crash the revolutionary potential of the liberation struggle. Of course, there are circumstances when entering negotiations with the enemy may be unavoidable, in a situation of weakness or as a result of military exhaustion, for example. But this should not be presented to one's own supporters as anything other than the need for a negotiated, temporary truce to buy time. In fact all the groups in the discussions actively sowed illusions in the role and aspirations of Rajiv Ghandi. The spokesperson for the Eelam People Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) was typical in this regard:

"We went to Thimpu and we have come to Delhi because we want peace, honour and dignity. We are not against India's efforts. Our faith in the Indian government has not diminished?"

What does seem to have diminished is their faith in the mass mobilisation of the Tamil working class and poor peasantry. The most important of the guerrilla groups, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged in 1977.

They emerged and grew as genuine defence organisations of the Tamil villages and are sustained by them. At a military level they have been capable of heroic and daring attacks on the state forces, but they have never been strong enough to prevent pogroms or reprisals. A more fundamental weakness inherent in guerrillarism pursued as a political strategy has been the failure to set the mass of the Tamil working class in motion behind the goal of national liberation.

As revolutionary communists we give unconditional support to the light of the Tamil people for self determination, up to and including separation the right to secede and form their state of Tamil Eelam.

The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie may denounce the separation and ban the TULF from Parliament because of it, but it is a problem they created. They could have solved the Tamil "problem" at a much lower level decades ago, when the demands of the Tamils did not go much beyond language and educational rights and against job discrimination.

Under the yoke of oppression, enforced and cemented by pogroms and even colonisation of Tamil areas, the Tamils have now come to see separation as the only answer. Not to support this right is to capitulate to Sinhalese chauvinism.

However, as Marxists, we do not advocate the road of separation as a real and lasting solution to the oppression suffered by the Tamil people. We are in principle in favour of the largest possible integrated national territories as a way of fostering national political and economic development under the rule of the workers. The national geographical entity of Tamil Eelam would be the Northern and Eastern provinces which are amongst the most impoverished economically. Most of the guerrilla groups have, to date, rejected the option of becoming integrated into a unitary state with Tamil Nadu. In India, The majority of the Tamil groups recognise that those who hold this view in fact aim to reduce the Sinhalese to a minority and tend to fight chauvinism with chauvinism.

GUERRILLA SPLITS

Against this pro Indian nationalism most Tamil groups claim to be in favour of a "socialist" Eelam and some count

themselves ?Marxist Leninists?. They at least recognise that Rajiv Gandhi has not the slightest intention of allowing a socialist Tamil Eelam to be created on India?s South Eastern flank. However, this fact only serves to underline the opportunism and deceit involved in their attitude to Gandhi in the recent talks.

The failure to advance the cause of Tamil Eelam by the struggle of the masses has, this year, led to the ideological disintegration of the guerrilla movement and organisational splits. Today, there are two umbrella organisations. The largest is called the Eelam National Liberation Front (ENLF). Within this are to be found the LTTE, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the EPRLF and the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS). The second is the People?s Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) which claims 6000 fighters in the field and the Tamil Liberation Army (TELA). However there are probably no more than 1,000 armed fighters in the field spread across all six groups.

While the split reflects the growing impasse of the movement, the differences are of a secondary character. On a day to day basis the two groups differ as to the military targets of their guerilla action. Those in the ENLF tend to hit economic targets such as ahotels and banks; in addition the LTTE tend to concentrate on killing individual soldiers. They have been accused by PLOTE of succumbing to chauvinism and killing Sinhalese civilians without good cause.

STAGEISM

PLOTE argue that the prime purpose of military action is to defend the Tamils from attack. They also conduct raids on barracks and on police stations with the aim of capturing arms. They claim to be son sectarian and even to have some Sinhalese members.

Despite these differences the groups are united at a more fundamental level; namely, over the relationship between the democratic and socialist stage of the revolution and over their attitude to the Tamil working class and its role in the struggle for national liberation. For example, PLOTE has argued: ?in the struggle for the establishment of a socialist state PLOTE has clearly identified two phases. During the first phase the aim is a democratic revolution via a national liberation struggle, the second stage being the consolidation of the first phase, and the continued class struggle leading to the establishment of a socialist state? (Our Enemy Is Imperialism, page 2).

It is only necessary to ask which class has the interest and power to achieve even the ?democratic revolution? in Sri Lanka, and the weakness of PLOTE?s position emerges. The Tamil bourgeoisie are a weak force. Their social base is largely confined to commerce and the professions. It is only the Tamil working class particularly the Tamil plantation workers of the hill country where 70% of the GNP is produced that can crush Jayawardene?s Bonapartist role.

The PLOTE, more than any of the groups recognise the force of this argument. That is why they insist that the democratic phase means; a strong people?s democracy. This alone can guarantee the democratic rights of the masses as a whole, and do away with the pseudo democracy enjoyed by a section of the people ? ?the privileged class? (ibid).

Moreover, to prevent the emergence of Tamil Eelam as a ?bourgeois state?, it is essential that ?the working class assumes leadership at all levels of the struggle? (ibid).

Yet it is precisely this recognition that introduces an unbearable tension into PLOTE?s strategy. How, around what demands and goals, with what methods of struggle, can the working class come to the leadership of the straggle for national liberation? What exactly will it take to arouse the Tamil plantation workers? The simple call for s separate Tamil Eeam state has, by and large, left them unmoved.

CLASS STRUGGLE

This cannot simply be explained by reference to the slave like conditions under which they toil. Rather, these Kandyan Tamils do not see how a separate Northern and Eastern Tamil Eelam relates to the question of relieving their oppression and exploitation. Are they being asked to vacate the Southern Highlands and move? For what? Poverty and unemployment under their ?own? state? The contradictions of a struggle limited to nationalist goals are obvious. They

explain the passivity of the Kandyan Tamils in the present nationalist struggle.

To seriously mobilise the masses means to agitate and organise around the key democratic and social demands that strike at the heart of the enslavement of the Tamil plantation workers. Of course, this must include the fundamental democratic rights which have been stolen from the plantation Tamils. Today, only a quarter of them have voting and citizenship rights.

Yet unless the social demands of the plantation Tamils are placed in the foreground they will remain passive. Whole families work for less than £2 a day. They survive on rice handouts. Families of ten live in one room ten foot square. Demands on pay and conditions of work and home life are decisive here.

The guerrilla groups must also recognise that the methods of class struggle needed to achieve these demands are the strike, occupation and general strike. At the moment, as a statement of PLOTE reveals, they do not understand this: 'There is a consensus of opinion among all groups involved in the liberation struggle of Tamil Eelam that the only means to achieve their goal is through the armed struggle.' (ibid page 7)

So long as this outlook predominates then the working class will not be allowed to assume the leadership of the struggle. Armed actions and guerrillarism can only be an auxiliary method of struggle.

In the first instance, armed defence of the villages from attack, of workers meetings, demonstrations or to supervise the occupation of factories at plantations, are the necessary military tasks that relate to the mass struggle. But the main weapons of the workers are the strike and the occupation. Only these will guarantee the participation of the mass of workers in the own liberation. Only these will generate a movement to immobilise and overthrow Jayawardene.

REVOLUTION

To advance along this road however, is to consciously abandon the search for a distinct 'democratic phase' in the Sri Lankan revolution. While common action with bourgeois forces cannot be ruled out if those forces are prepared to engage in a real struggle against the Sinhalese oppressors. We cannot subordinate the demands and goals of the Tamil workers to what is acceptable to these forces. The forces in the TUL and those most closely associate with Ghandi's initiatives include landowners or small employers as well as professionals. They will oppose the mobilisation of the masses around their class demands because it threatens the own class privileges.

Those fighters sympathetic to the guerrillas must face up this dilemma. To achieve national liberation the Tamil workers must be mobilised in class struggle actions around their own class demands. If they come to the leadership of this struggle, if they succeed in establishing a Worker and Peasants government then they will not stop their revolution halfway. With political power they will move against capitalist property and their imperialist overlords. Indeed, the full flowering of a 'people's democracy' can only take place after the overthrow of capitalism in Sri Lanka. In short, the revolution must become a permanent revolution.

Finally, a radical break with the outlook and program of Tamil nationalism is crucial precisely because success is unlikely unless the bulk of the Sri Lankan working class, which is Sinhalese is brought over to the side of the revolution. It is hardly necessary to point out that they cannot be mobilised as a class to the fight for a separate Tamil Eelam even though it is crucial to the task of breaking them from the UNP that they are won over to supporting the right of Tamils to self determination.

PROGRAMME

Above all, Sinhala Tamil proletarian unity can be sustained to the end only by a common action programme of immediate and transitional demands aimed against Jayawardene's regime and its imperialist backers.

Against the cuts in food subsidies!

Against all cuts in social services and benefits!

For the cancellation of all debts to the imperialist bankers and all payments to the former plantation owners!

For workers? control of the nationalised estates and plantations!

For a sliding scale of wages to defend living standards against inflation caused by repeated devaluations of the rupee!

For a real programme of agrarian revolution. Take the land away from the landowners and the state bureaucrats to ensure its collective co operative

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