

## Sri Lanka: a new party?

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In the aftermath of President Mahinda Rajapaksa's victory in his war against the Tamils, the JVP, the supposedly Marxist party that backed him, has split apart. Peter Main, outlines the history behind the split and the prospects it has created.

The split in the JVP opens up the potential for a regeneration of the entire working class movement in Sri Lanka. Ever since the defeat of the general strike in 1980, the movement has been fragmented and effectively paralysed. More than 1700 unions represent less than 2 million workers, there is no central trade union confederation and no workers' party. The long-standing oppression of the Tamils, in which the JVP played a scandalous role, has created inter-communal tensions that will not easily be overcome.

The Movement for People's Struggle, MPS, is undoubtedly a left split away from the JVP. Although it is yet to publish its new programme, its leaders have spoken of the need for a new party that will be a "party of the Left" committed not only to open collaboration with other left groups but opposed, in principle, to coalition with bourgeois parties. They have also rejected Sinhala chauvinism and have made it clear that they are conducting an internal debate over the right of self-determination of the Tamils.

It is these, apparently fundamental, changes in political principle and strategy that could allow a re-alignment, possibly even a re-unification, of the workers' movement.

However, this is still very far from guaranteed. This is not the first time that the JVP or, more properly, the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (Bolshevik) has tried to resurrect itself in the aftermath of disaster caused by its own political strategies. The danger now is that the MPS will do no more than rejuvenate that tradition in yet another reorientation, this time towards a more "democratic" and working class strategy.

For some on the Sri Lankan left, this is virtually a foregone conclusion. The Socialist Party of Sri Lanka, the section of the League for the Fifth International, however, believes that it is necessary to take every possible opportunity to convince the MPS, more particularly its rank and file, and even the rank and file still in the JVP, to complete the break with their past strategy and work towards the founding of a new workers' party.

Indeed, recognising that this is a strategic need for the working class in Sri Lanka, the SPSL has pursued a united front policy, even toward the JVP and its unions, for several years. While the JVP was in government with Rajapaksa, we demanded that its trade unions fight to defend their members' interests against government economic policy. When the JVP split, we welcomed the formation of the MPS and worked together with it on the symbolic convoy from Colombo to Jaffna and in the newly formed Committee Against Abductions and Disappearances.

In response to the MPS' decision to found a new party, we have published an Open Letter to the whole of the Sri Lankan left and working class movement. In it we propose a conference to launch a campaign throughout the country to found not a new organisation for the 5,000 who have left the JVP, but a new

workers' party based on the mass organisations, primarily the trade unions. Through this campaign the programme and organisational statutes of a new party can be widely discussed in preparation for a national conference to adopt drafts that could, after further discussion, be adopted at a founding congress.

For our part, we have proposed our existing Action Programme, which applies the strategy of Permanent Revolution to Sri Lanka, as the programmatic basis for a new party. We have urged other left groups to formulate in writing their own strategies for achieving socialism on the island. We are, of course, prepared to amend our programme in the light of developments and proposals from other groups. Provided any new party recognises the rights of minorities within it, we would be prepared to implement majority decisions with which we disagreed, providing they were not in themselves unprincipled.

As we say in the Open Letter, the supremacy of the Rajapaksa clan, ?has opened the way for the imposition of a model of development in which the prosperity of the few is to be ensured through a low-wage economy and Free Trade Zones, while the country itself becomes a pawn in the rivalry between China and India.?

If such a development is to be avoided, the fight against it must have as its strategic goal not a period of stable democratic capitalist development, but the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' and farmers' government committed to socialist development and the internationalisation of the revolution to create a Federation of Workers' States of South Asia.

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