For Whom For What ?

A Party of the Working People !

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■ **For whom ? For what ? A Party of the Working People !**
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Prelude

Hey, Whom would you vote for this time ..?

A girl taking off a headset she was wearing asked from her friend standing close by. 'All are useless. No point in voting anyone. Can't you just see the way we are forced to travel every day?' was her reply.

'Are you going to spoil your vote? We still have to go to the polling station. It's better to stay at home and sleep a little longer." This conversation took place in a jam-packed Bangadeniya Express train.

Conversations of this nature are not limited to those who travel in buses or trains. You might be able to hear similar conversations at the village bazaar or at the entrance to a school. Or it could be at a government office, or in a canteen. It could even be the factory or the farm.

A liberal civil society activist overhearing such a conversation will conclude that Sri Lanka is a country with subjects, not citizens.
'Who will win this time? one prominent businessman asked from another. 'No matter who wins we will give the same amount to election funds of the two candidates of the main parties", was the other's response.

This was an exchange between two businessmen after attending a conference at a five-star hotel.

Working people feel it's irrelevant whoever wins. On the other hand, businessmen think they could benefit whoever wins.

1985
Joint May Day Rally 1985
and
Workers Party of Ceylon

2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THE MASSES

1

1. 2019 Presidential election and the masses

The election commission has scheduled the next presidential election on November 16, 2019. 35 candidates altogether have handed over nominations. As candidates, all of them have the same legal right. No one could be deemed as principal candidates.

However, this idea of equality is as absurd as other forms of equality in our social system. There are more inequalities. Some candidates possess an enormous amount of money at their disposal to spend in the election. From local businessmen to various foreign diplomatic missions donate money to their election funds. Among these, there are candidates overblown by the media. Also, some candidates have solid political parties and institutional mechanisms dedicated to themselves.

A look at the previous presidential election will reveal that the percentage of voter turnover is significantly high. It indicates that even those who were reluctant to vote have cast their vote at the

end. It's not because they found a favorable candidate at the last moment. We have habits. An election occurs once in a while. In 1994 and 2015 we were euphoric when we changed governments. We had a lot of expectations. However, a comparison would show that these elections are not different from any other. Everything is forgotten. During elections we also receive gifts. It is not ethical not to vote after receiving them. Our religions do not permit such things. Besides, it is possible that such actions could terminate such benefits. We are a nation that has cast our votes for over eight (08) decades from the early years in the 1930s. Despite what the civil society activists think we always go to the polling station. We enjoy watching political debates on the TV. We spend sleepless nights listening to election results. An election is a carnival of some sort. We dance till water boils. Most of the other times we think that neither of these elected representatives is useful. As has been ascribed to England by the French philosopher Rousseau, we obtain autonomy once in every five years.

..On the other hand, businessmen benefit irrespective of who holds the power. Whoever assumes power only talks about uplifting the business community and the tax breaks and other concessions they are entitled to. If the working people are to receive anything, it is as spinoffs of concessions given to businessmen. The increasing inequality in the redistribution of income and wealth over the last fifteen years shows that such a trickle-down does not happen..

On the other hand, businessmen benefit irrespective of who holds the power. Whoever assumes power only talks about uplifting the business community and the tax breaks and other concessions they are entitled to. If the working people are to receive anything, it is as spinoffs of concessions given to businessmen. The increasing inequality in the redistribution of income and wealth over the last fifteen years shows that such a trickle-down does not happen.

We have used our vote for 30 years under the Parliamentary system and 42 years under the Executive Presidential system. But at each election, we ask a question from ourselves: "Is it worthwhile to vote any of these candidates?" In the presidential election in 2019 and other elections in the future, we should ask a different question. We should consider how the business class behaves. After spending millions and billions of rupees during elections they make sure create a party that plays into their whims and fancies. An election is another enterprise for them. Shouldn't we face elections through a party supported by our funds? Can't we do that?

This booklet attempts to answer this question. This is not an attempt to contest in elections soon but proposes a solution to our practice of cursing after casting vote once in every five years. We, the compilers of this booklet, have been engaged in trade unions, farmers' and fishers' organizations. When an election looms this is the question that you ask even us; "who is the best choice in this election?" As much as posing such a question, create space for such questions to be raised is a mistake. We too have contributed to that blunder. This should not continue. Shouldn't we find an answer that stops such questions being raised? What is the answer?

To put it short and simple, the working people should create a political party of their own, for them alone and steered by them. ■

Who are the Working people? 2

2. Who are the working people?

'A political party of the working people, by the working people and for the working people' resonates the celebrated statement by the late US President Abraham Lincoln explaining what Democracy is. According to him, Democracy is a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Even though it is a simple and attractive way of explaining what Democracy is or what a party of the working people is, this definition raises several other questions. The first question is what do we understand from concepts like 'people' and 'working people'? Working people are only a portion of the people. In fact, they are the majority. The population of Sri Lanka is about 22 million. If we treat those under 18 years of age as minors, people comprise of about 16-17 million. To determine how many can be brought into the category of working people, we should work on a simple definition.

The first element is their contribution either to production, or exchange, or distribution of goods

and services. They could either be adding a value or involved in direct or indirect activities related to value exchange and distribution. If we consider only this, should we also treat factory owners, managers, and high-ranking bureaucrats as working people? They also make some contribution to production, exchange and distribution of economic goods and services. But there is a question we should pose. Is this category of upper social class indispensable for proper and sustained existence of society? Can't we do without them? Answers to these questions will help us to understand the second element.

The second element is the fact that working people are exploited, oppressed and alienated in the economic process of production, exchange and distribution. They involve in this process as subjugated men and women and not as those with some degree of autonomy. Experiences from different countries illustrate that liberation from such subordination enables the working people to undertake tasks carried out by the upper social classes. Although a factory owner, a manager and bureaucrats are involved in the process of production, exchange and distribution, it is being done with the view to further the process of capital accumulation and as a result, they are not included under the category of working people.

With the help of these two elements, we define the term 'working people' as follows. Working people are the people who make some sort of contribution in the process of production, exchange and distribution but are being exploited, oppressed and alienated either directly or indirectly in the process of capital accumulation.

We have identified a number of questions stimulated by this definition. Let's take an example. Think about the salary of a professor at a university. Her monthly salary would be either Rs. 360, 000/= or more. She makes some degree of contribution to the process of production, exchange and distribution. However, her contribution does not directly support the process of capital accumulation. At the same time, she does not directly take part in the capital accumulation process. If she provides her consultations

services for an activity which directly support the process of capital accumulation, then it is a different matter. People like this should be treated as an intermediate category between the working people and the ruling class. Though this category raises an analytical question, we are not going to focus much on that in our discussion.

Could we include those who are in working age, but unemployed in this category of working people? We propose to do so. Why? In a social system dominated by the capital, unemployed people are essential to sustain the process of accumulation. Unless, the society dominated by capital cannot absorb them into the process of production, exchange and distribution.

The other question is whether those people who sell their emotional or physical labor for wages and do not own any of the means of production and the small farmers and fishers who have some kind of ownership to means of production and make a living by selling the bulk of their production be treated the same? This is somewhat a complex challenge. We encounter numerous debates on this in Marxist literature. Both of these groups of people in the course to their liberation should adjust socio-economic structures differently. To assume that there would be similar developments within both of these categories is to make a simplified reading. Both of these categories are exploited and oppressed during the process of capital accumulation. At the same time, even though their measures to liberate themselves from such oppressed conditions are different, we can see them marching towards the same goal. Therefore, it is important to consider these two sub-categories at equal footing as working people.

Before completing this section, we should make one warning to ourselves. The concept of class has a notion of a historical relationship. We cannot understand it by locating at a particular point of the relationship. We need to understand class relations by locating it among real people and real contexts. ■

Working people and Consciousness 3

3. Working people and consciousness[1]

For the working people to free themselves from the socio-economic-political and cultural jail that imprison their class, they should first understand the nature of the prison cell they are in. Understanding this is known as class consciousness. Class consciousness does not occur in a flash. Just because they understand the nature of the socio-economic-political and cultural prison cell, it does not enable them to liberate themselves from it. Also, we should keep in mind that working people gain this knowledge not through books but often through life and collective experience. This is a long and complex process. To facilitate an understanding, we could discuss it in several steps. Two concepts introduced in German Philosophy have assisted a great deal to understand the beginning and the end of this. We will start from there.

First of all, it tells us about the social class, a binding root which arises through a historical process.

1 This section could be done away with in the first reading

..We should understand that it is very difficult for working people to attain class consciousness. We will only be deceiving ourselves if we think that it is easy and that there won't be any retreating. The English working class which is considered as the pioneering working-class movement in the world, commenced its journey by organizing as debating teams during the early days of the American Independence Struggle..

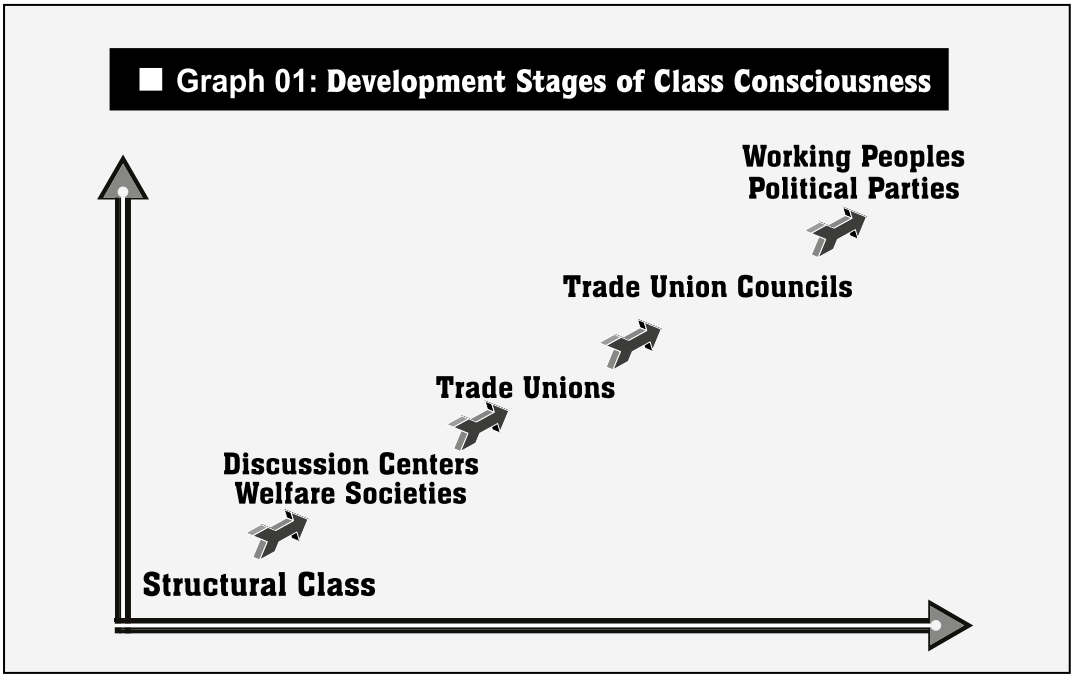
We call it 'class-in-itself'. As the capitalist system evolves working class is created as a social class. It also creates the capitalist class who own capital. In societal arrangements before capitalism, you could see a different social order. What we can see here is that the creation and development of a social system also accompanies a unique class system. When the class rests at that we call it 'class-in-itself'. In such a context, the class could be distinguished from others. However, members of the particular class do not have an understanding of that.

When such a class gradually gains awareness of its existence, we encounter the second counterpart. The class-in-itself transforms into the 'class-for-itself'. Now, the class is not only an outcome of the social structure. A class for itself that actively work towards its wellbeing.

Transformation of a structural class into class consciousness is not a smooth process. In any society, the dominant belief system is the belief system of the ruling class. No one can prevent this. It is also true in a capitalist society. In pre-capitalist societies, punitive power was used to dominate the subaltern classes. In a capitalist society even though there is a mechanism to activate punitive power, it's not used all the time. Instead, the capitalist power mechanism operates via education, media, and 'discussion groups' which utilize ethical power to convince the subaltern classes that the existing system is just.

We should understand that it is very difficult for working people to attain class consciousness. We will only be deceiving ourselves if we think that it is easy and that there won't be any retreating. The English working class which is considered as the pioneering working-class movement in the world, commenced its journey by organizing as debating teams during the early days of the American Independence Struggle. London Corresponding Society, which is considered the first working-class organization also followed this path more or less. It was a collective of militants than a working-class organization.

In many occasions when it was impossible to form trade union or when the workers did not understand the significance of forming a trade union, they established welfare societies. Nevertheless, the crucial step towards class consciousness begins with the establishment of trade unions.



The formation of a trade union starts with the understanding which comes through the collective action over time. Working people realize that it is impossible to improve work as well as bargaining conditions by being separated from other fellow workers. On the other hand, the formation of a welfare society implies a collective

effort to face the hardships. But this effort does not problematize the situation in the workplace. Formation of a trade union goes a step further. It questions the business owner, companies or the state. It indicates the need for collective bargaining. Through the acceptance of constant struggle and contradictions between the working people and the ruling class, the trade unions attempt to propose collective struggles for better wages, income and work conditions. Consequently, the formation of trade unions indicates a higher level of consciousness as illustrated in Graph 01. However, the formation of a trade union still demonstrates the thinking that it is possible to address the grievances of the working people within the contradictions of labor and capital. Sometimes, this is known as trade union mentality.

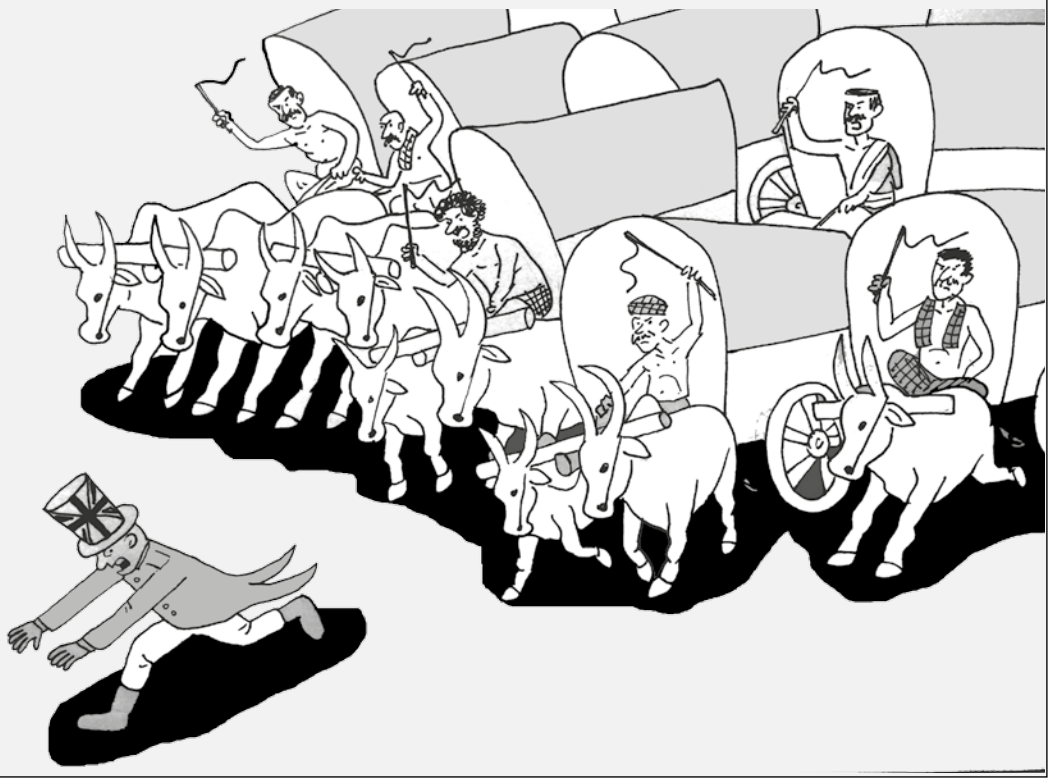
However, the situation changes when working people realize that many laws legislated by the State benefit the ruling class. Here, we could identify two trends. Firstly, it is imperative to develop cooperation with workers who face similar hardships and struggles. This creates a need for some sort

..However, the situation changes when working people realize that many laws legislated by the State benefit the ruling class. Here,we could identify two trends. Firstly, it is imperative to developcooperation with workers who face similar hardships and struggles. This creates a need for some sort of solidarity among the unions. Secondly, the worker should realize the need to exert minimum pressure against the state power in a struggle to win their rights. This was aptly demonstrated by the Chartist Movement in early 1800 when they demanded the universal franchise..

of solidarity among the unions. Secondly, the worker should realize the need to exert minimum pressure against the state power in a struggle to win their rights. This was aptly demonstrated by the Chartist Movement in early 1800 when they demanded the universal franchise.

Independent struggles of the working people and organizing independent organizations at the national level are an outcome of enormous knowledge and experiences amassed by the working people as a class. It denotes a higher level of consciousness. An independent political organization of the working people is only a hoot away. In many countries, the establishment of political parties based on trade unions was a direct consequence of this process. It shows the capacity of working people to control the state power as well as their right to do so. We can see many such parties being created in Europe during the twentieth century. It is not limited to Europe. Socialist parties in Latin America also connotes this trend. The most significant example is the Labor Party in Brazil. As the next chapter indicate such experiences could also be found in Sri Lanka in contemporary history.■

The Unwritten Story 4



4. The Unwritten Story

The idea of an independent working people's party is not new to us in Sri Lanka. Kumari Jayawardena's book Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon sheds light on this.[2] A class of working people in the modern sense was created with the emergence of the plantation economy. However, since the people in the rural sector had a traditional right to cultivate a piece of land, they disliked the idea of becoming fully wage laborers. Therefore, the necessary labor to work in the plantation was brought from South India. They were mainly confined to the plantations. Consequently, they are known as indentured laborers or bonded laborers. A Colombo centered trading class, an industrial working class who provided their services to the plantation sector as well as various other sectors linked to railways emerged in parallel to the plantation sector. By 1911 the urban working class was about 75, 000. This group of workers with their systematic formation promptly understood their conditions than the plantation workers. The urban working class learnt the first lesson on the collective by forming welfare societies. They understood the benefits of working together with everyone. At first, these societies were popular among trained workers. According to Dr Kumari Jayawardena, three office-bearers in the first trade union which came to be in 1893 had been active in employee's welfare societies.

2 Kumari Jayawardena's book was used to write this section. The book has a Sinhala translation. We recommend that every trade union leader should read it.

It is difficult to specify a date for the first strike in Sri Lanka. In 1860, the carpenters and teachers in a technical school belonging to Mr Thurston did a work stoppage. In 1870 irrigation workers in the Eastern Province also stopped their work. Many such struggles were reported before the explosion of the first organized workers' struggle in 1893 in the H. W. Cave & Company in Colombo. The Cave & Company was a printing corporation belonging to the British. 60 printing workers launched a struggle against the employer for failing to pay monthly salaries regularly. Two days after Sri Lanka's first trade union was founded in a meeting convened by the printing workers. Even if the struggle was not a success and Printing Workers' trade union was not strong, subsequent developments indicate that this was a turning point in the political journey of the working people in Sri Lanka. Kumari Jayawardena reminds us that trade union strikes became a frequent phenomenon in urban life afterwards. Launders' strike and carters' strikes are such outstanding strikes.[3] In 1906 Henry Blake, the British Governor identified the strike launched by 5000 carters as a sign of collective strength. The other most significant milestone was the railway strike in 1912.

We should not forget that these initial struggles by the working people took place when they did not have legal rights to form trade unions. Strikers were punished according to the law. They were dismissed from their jobs and exiled from Colombo.

We can identify 5 major trends when we examine the gradual developments in the workers' movement since 1890. We have to study these 5 trends as they have had both positive and negative influences on the present workers' movement. They are,

1. Difficulties faced by the workers who struggled when they did not have legal rights.
2. Support and intervention of the middle class.
3. Influence and assimilation with the national and religious renaissance movement under the British era.
4. Influence and impact of the international movements.

3 Some time ago Dr Kumari Jayawardena published three illustrated booklets related to these three incidents; printers' strike, launders' strike and carters' strike. Reading them is extremely important.

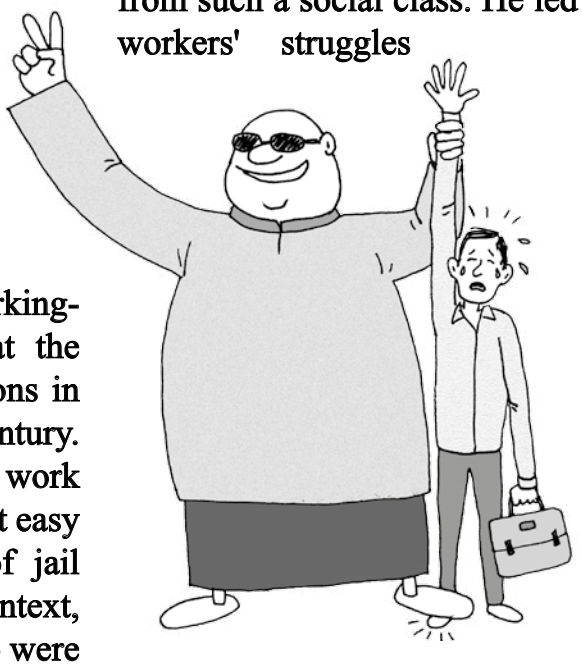
5. Ambiguity in the division between the working class and other oppressed people.

1. DIFFICULTIES FACED BY THE WORKERS IN STRUGGLES:

Five leaders of the printers strike in 1893 were dismissed. Charges were brought against the working-class leader William in the Supreme Court and was sentenced to a one-week jail term. A case was filed against the launders' strike as well. One estate worker was killed during a strike at Mul-Oya estate towards the end of 1930. It was the first death at a trade union strike.

2. SUPPORT OF THE MIDDLE CLASS:

We saw the creation of a working-class in a systemic sense at the backdrop of the transformations in the economy in the 19th century. Just because they labor in one work under the same roof, it was not easy to comprehend the nature of jail cell they were in. In this context, middle-class intellectuals who were frustrated by the injustice in the social system came forward to educate the workers on how to act in order to free themselves from the 'class-in-itself' situation. The first of such people is A.E. Buultjens, who was a Burgher. He was returning from England after completing his studies there. After renouncing Christianity and embracing Buddhist faith, he started on this endeavor as a teacher at the Ananda College. Another important person was Lisbova Pinto a Christian Doctor who came from Goa. He acted as a mediator during the printers' strike. During the carters' strike John Kothalawala directly helped the strikers. A. E. Gunasinghe who had done a great service to establish a Trade Union movement in Sri Lanka also came from such a social class. He led the workers' struggles



and started the unions in Banking, Mercantile, Clerical and railway sectors. Going beyond establishing unions, he founded the Ceylon Labour Party in 1928. He could also establish the All Ceylon Trade Union Congress by linking his

Ceylon Workers' Congress with the Ceylon Labour Party. Organizing estate workers happened very slowly under the leadership of Natesa Iyar. Besides these middle-class intellectuals, there were other middle-class leaders who were compassionate towards workers' rights and their struggles.

3. THE RISE OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT CANNOT BE DISCUSSED INDEPENDENTLY OF THE IMPACT AND ASSIMILATION WITH THE NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS RENAISSANCE MOVEMENTS IN SRI LANKA.

All labour leaders such as A.E. Buultjens, Lisbova Pinto, John Kotalawala, A.E. Gunasinghe and Natesa Iyar were involved in the anti-imperialist, national and religious revival movements. Many leaders of the national and religious revivalist movement had a critical but a sympathetic eye towards trade unions struggles. If the workers' movement was captured by a political force at the very beginning, it was because of the national and religious renaissance movement. Revivalist movements in all religions such as Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism against the Christianization were a common feature at this time.

4. INFLUENCE AND IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES:

As we have seen, many of the pioneers in the working people's movement in Sri Lanka were educated in the West. In particular, the impact of English labor and left movements in formulating the framework and objectives of the workers' movement in Sri Lanka has been strong. The other major influence came from the Indian National Movement. The Indian National Movement and the National and Religious Renaissance Movement in Sri Lanka were closely connected. This effect was especially pronounced among the more militant sections of the national and religious renaissance movement. Swami Vivekananda and Orabi Pasha, the leader of the Egyptian National Struggle influenced in a great deal on the national struggle in Sri Lanka. Foreign scholars and activists also brought dissenting views to the country. Colonel Henry Olcott, Annie Besant and Helena Blavatsky are prominent names here.

5. AMBIGUITY IN THE DIVISION BETWEEN THE WORKING CLASS AND OTHER OPPRESSED PEOPLE

The direct grip of capital over the wage laborers is evident. Many others who are not directly dealing

with capital are still oppressed by the pursuits of profit. In addition, we should not forget that there are diverse groups in our society who are victimized by socio-economic and cultural pressure. Bringing all these groups under one institutional framework could lead to problems. For example, despite significant differences between printers, launders and carters, they all belong to the working-class. And it is very hard to differentiate working people from someone having a small business or a grocery store. Positive and negative impacts of these consequences on the working peoples' movement could be seen through the developments and declines of the working peoples' movement during the 1930s and beyond. Table 02 summarizes these points. The impact of these influences, both positively and negatively on the working people's movement, is best illustrated by the developments and the decline of the working people's movement in the country during the 1930s and beyond. The second note summarizes these points.

■ Note 02: Impact on the Working People's Party

		Positive Impact	Negative impact
1	Support and intervention of middle class	Guide & educate working people to organize	Possibility of trickling down of middle-class motives and prejudices into the working-class movement
2	Integration and Impact of the National and religious renaissance movements	These movements could provide ethical and quantitative solidity to the struggles arising from oppression and alienation	National and Religious Renaissance movement can create nationalist and religious divisions in the working peoples' movement.
3	Impact and influence of international movements	The working peoples' movement is essentially an international phenomenon. Therefore, international experience and cooperation was important.	Downfall of the movement with international defeats and possible disorder due to wrong analysis of international developments.
4	The ambiguity in the division between workers and other oppressed groups of people	Quantitative advantage	Conflicts between objectives and organizational issues

To some extent, the second note will be helpful to understand A.E. Gunasinghe's role in the working-

..In the 1950s and 60s, we saw the rise of a socialist populism in the global South. Working people didn't see the difference between that socialist-populism and the socialist politics practised by the Left in general. Because of the widespread perception that they could benefit from the government, even the parties of the ruling class were able to form trade unions. .

class movement in the 1930s. He even spearheaded racist propaganda against urban Malayalam workers. However, his contribution to organize a strong independent workers' movement and underscore the need for an independent political party of the working people cannot be underestimated.

We must critically examine the influence of the middle-class intellectuals as well as the connection between the trade union movement, the national and religious revivalist movement that contributed to the rise of the working-class movement until the 1950s. These factors had a profound impact on the retreats and setbacks of the workers' movement. The middle classes were often the carriers of the germs of the ruling class into the labor movement.

The Russian Revolution in 1917 was led by urban workers, peasants and soldiers. This revolution not only overthrew the tyrannical Tsar. It defeated the politicians who sought an intermediate solution with Tsarism. This revolution gave a new impetus to the struggle of the working people throughout the world. The idea of a social system embedded on equality, justice and freedom was firmly established. Not surprisingly, this effect has also filtered into the workers' movement in Sri Lanka.

In the later years, the vacuum created in the workers and the poor peoples' movement with the demise of A.E. Gunasinghe was filled by another group of intellectuals who studied in England and America. They too were of middle-class origin. They also fell prey to the great cloud created by the Russian Revolution. The LSSP (Lanka Sama

Samaja Party) was formed in 1935 through the Youth Movement of the 1930s, Suriyamal Movement, the campaign against poverty and caste oppression in the Kelani Valley and the strike in Wellawatte Textile Mills. The Ceylon Communist Party was formed by a fragmented part of the LSSP in 1938 due to the division of the international communist movement. By 1950, the power of most of the trade unions formed by Gunasinghe was gradually shifted to these two parties. Both parties were able to gain considerable power even in the parliamentary arena and were, in fact, national parties.

However, by the 1960s, even the Left Movement was overcome by the negative effects illustrated in Note 2. As a result, the LSSP's decision to join a coalition government with the SLFP (Sri Lanka Freedom Party) in 1964 defeated the idea of an independent working people's party for the second time. Breakaway faction of the LSSP was not able to fill that gap. Until the mid-1970s, the LSSP and LCP were able to maintain organizational power in the working class since they believed in the formation of a coalition government and winning the 1970 elections as expected. However, by 1975 the right-wing of the Government expelled the Left from it after the menial tasks assigned to them were accomplished. In the 1977 elections, the Left lost even the parliamentary seats it had secured since 1936.

The defeat of the idea of independent class politics in the 1960s shows a retreat illustrated in Note 1. The bearing of negative factors that were raised in Note 02 on such a setback should be highlighted. At the same time, we must keep in mind that national and international factors have also played a role in this. In the 1950s and 60s, we saw the rise of a socialist populism in the global South. Working people didn't see the difference between that socialist-populism and the socialist politics practiced by the Left in general. Because of the widespread perception that they could benefit from the government, even the parties of the ruling class were able to form trade unions. The idea of the Workers' Party in 1928 had died by 1970s. It was restricted to a very small corner. 1964 was not only a great betrayal but also a savage one. ■

Unfinished Beginning 5

5. Unfinished Beginning

The idea of an independent working peoples' party re-surfaced at a time when the class movement was trapped within massive oblivion. It was also a time when the working-class power had diminished. The rural working class was controlled by right-wing parties. Therefore, efforts to hoist the working-class flag again was attempted in a very unfavorable setting. In March 1981, the Ceylon Mercantile Union, the Ceylon Estate Staff Union and the Ceylon Plantation Services Union issued a statement about a majority Labor Party. On January 03, 1982, Comrade Bala Tampoe while answering a question raised by "The Island" newspaper about the need for a new political party of workers said,

> ***"The idea about a majority Labor Party emerges through the recognition that not a single political party in this country represents the working class and can hardly be expected to act in the best interests of the working class. In short, the***

working class has to make its own political apparatus. It cannot divorce itself from politics. If it does not have its own political means to enter into politics when political problems arise it will either have to work with some party or with a group of parties. This is one of the most frequent problems that the working-class encounter".

Although there were discussions on establishing a majority labor party between 1981-1984 period, those attempts were unsuccessful. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly,

Coalition governments with the political parties of the ruling class had completely numbed and incapacitated the working class and other groups of working people. The extreme defeat of the Left parties in the 1977 election left little room for the working people to regain power. The open economic policy introduced in 1977 stimulated a new hope among a significant section of working people that they would get some benefits.

Secondly,

With the defeat of the 1980 strike, the most militant leaders of the working-class like U. E. Perera, S. Sathyapala (Railway Employees Union), Gunasena Mahanama (Government Clerical Services Union), H. N. Fernando and Chitral Perera (Ceylon Teachers Union) were dismissed. It broke the organic relationship between the class and the leadership. All these leaders were veterans and had originated within the workplaces.

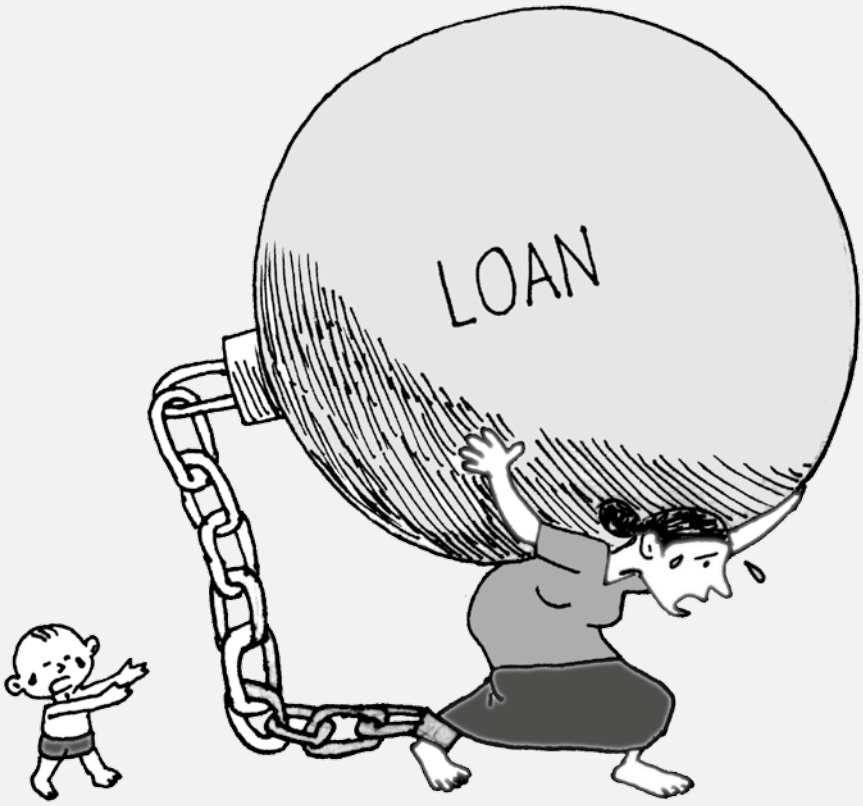
Thirdly,

The nationalist tendencies had been steadily developing among the working class after the Black July in 1983. In such a context, a working-class party representing all the communities was impossible.

Fourthly,

The bond between the three organizations which attempted to form a majority Labor Party and the broader class movement was very weak. Under such circumstances, other unions could not be expected to contribute to such an effort.■

6 The crisis before us



6. The crisis before us

At this moment, Sri Lanka is going through the first generalized endemic crisis after independence. Before this, Sri Lanka had faced economic crises. The country had also gone through massive political crises. From time to time, crises at the social and cultural realms also erupted. Reports indicate that Sri Lanka has encountered diplomatic crises as well. However, the generalized endemic crisis differs from them as it represents simultaneous crises in all five sectors. While working people already know about it, it is important to make a brief introduction to its four dimensions.

Economy

According to the current economic development model, economic growth is measured by the growth of GDP. By 2018, Sri Lanka's total value of production is $ 89 billion. Accordingly, annual per-capita-income is $4102.00 (Rs 666,817.00). Therefore, Sri Lanka is considered as an upper-middle-income country. Two problems arise by trying to understand development in this manner.

..Another problem under this economic strategy is a serious breakdown in the rural economy. About 27% of Sri Lanka's workforce is still engaged in the agricultural sector. However, there is a tendency within the last couple of yearsto limit the socio-economic function of agriculture to its contribution to GDP..

First, increases in GDP do not reflect the living conditions of the masses. It is also important to understand how income is distributed among the masses. When the average monthly income of wealthiest 20% of the population is Rs 158,072, the poorest 20% get only around Rs 14,843. This inequality can be seen in the regions as well. There is an uneven income distribution among urban, rural and estate communities.

Second, this development model neglects the people and the environment. The development model adopted since 1977 has risked the ability of Sri Lanka to obtain Human Development ranking equivalent to that of a developed country. Those who talk about South Korean and Singaporean achievements in education, forget about Sri Lanka's achievements under the public provision of education. The neo-liberal policies have subjected working people as well as the entire population, animals and the environment to a severe crisis. We will try to understand this through a few examples.

Talk is about digitization, but jobs are precarious

By the year 2017, 68% of the jobs in Sri Lanka's economy came from the informal sector. About 77% of jobs in the rapidly expanding construction industry are informal. Informal employment constitutes about 56% in the food and restaurant services. The deregulation of the economy has allowed businessmen and the government to escape from existing labor laws in Sri Lanka.

Informal labor is very common in rural areas as well.

The weakening of peoples' rights to public services and public property

Privatization of public services such as education and health has shifted the burden of cost on the people. 13.9% of the non-food expenditure for a family in Colombo is spent on education and health. This is as high as 22% in Jaffna, about 14% in Hambantota. Although free education has not been completely destroyed, general masses cannot enjoy it equitably. According to the school classification, most of the AB1 category schools which facilitate the education of all disciplines are located in the Colombo district. The largest number of schools in Kilinochchi district offer education up to grade five or eighth.

Debilitating small producers and small farmers

Another problem under this economic strategy is a serious breakdown in the rural economy. About 27% of Sri Lanka's workforce is still engaged in the agricultural sector. However, there is a tendency within the last couple of years to limit the socio-economic function of agriculture to its contribution to GDP. Public investments in agriculture have gradually declined. The idea that commercialization would resurrect the farmer as well as the agriculture has become the state agricultural policy. Granting rural land to large agribusinesses, expansion of agri-businesses instead of small-scale farmer-based agriculture, privatization of land, water and seeds, mono-cultivation of other commercial crops such as soya, maize, and palm oil instead of paddy and transforming small farmers into laborers in agri-business or in other private companies have become the economic strategy of the government. This policy has adversely affected the rural economy and the rural population resulting in indebtedness, various diseases, and challenged the subsistence of the rural population and endangered the country's food sovereignty.

Massacring infant industries

After 1977, the economic policy shifted from an import substitution model to an export-oriented model. It severely damaged rural agriculture and infant industries. Although most of the developed countries protected their infant industries, the neo-liberal policies of 1977 exposed Sri Lanka's industries to the great cloud of the global competition. The best indicator of the failure of this policy is the deteriorating trade deficit.

Shifting the economy from productive sectors towards quick profits

Another disaster brought about by the current economic strategy is the shifting of the economy from a production-based economy to the financial sector for short-term profits. Capital is more inclined to invest in the financial services where it can accumulate more profit in the short run than investing in more productive industries that could generate meaningful jobs for working people. As a result, private capital is rapidly moving towards the construction, banking, finance and insurance services instead of the industrial and manufacturing sectors.

Poverty Enterprise

What we discussed so far reveal growing poverty throughout the country. Recently another 600,000 were added to the number of Samurdhi beneficiaries. Once every six years, politicians market poverty to get elected. Businessmen open loan-shops to lend to the poor. ■

Politics & Democracy 7

7. Politics & Democracy

The other major challenge we are facing today is the obstruction of space to solve the prevailing crisis by implementing alternative social, political and economic policies. An authoritarian rule has been impeding this space. We can identify several facets

■ Representative democratic institutions:

The problems of working people are hardly discussed in Sri Lanka's representative democratic bodies. One of the main reasons for this has been the close nexus between politics and the business class. Irrespective of election promises, the agenda of their masters will be implemented after politicians get elected. The current state of labor law and land reforms are two very good examples to understand the direction of policymaking.

■ Behavior of the Media:

The manipulation of public and private media, as well as the misuse of social media, is a serious obstacle to social progress. Understanding these circumstances, it is important to introduce a tradition of public

service journalism that protects the freedom of expression and ensures access to correct information.

■ Democratic rights

The other danger is the threat to the democratic rights of the people. With the introduction of open economic policies in 1977, the parliamentary system was transformed into an executive presidential system. As a result of this, Jayewardene, Premadasa, Chandrika and Rajapaksa regimes were able to suppress the struggles of the working class as well as the ethnic minorities violently and undemocratically. The counter terrorism bill presented by the current government shows that this threat is only getting worse.

■ Democracy in the workplace:

While a lot has been said about the contraction of representative democracy at the political level, there has been very little discussion on the narrowing of industrial democracy, the workplace democracy over the past 40 years. However, democracy at workplace is very important for working people.

■ Justice for ethnic groups

We the people of Sri Lanka have been battered by a 30 years long war. Even though the war was over, the ethnic disparities that caused the war and the problems caused by the war still remain. It is the custom and tactics of the rulers to divide and rule the people on the basis of ethnic and religious differences. It should not be forgotten that along with the national identity, the main cause of ethnic conflict, there are issues related to land and employment.

■ The problem of the upcountry plantation Tamil:

The people who call themselves as 'Malahei Tamil' are a group of people who have contributed to the country's economy free of charge. However, they are heavily oppressed and marginalized. Capitalist rulers deprived them of their citizenship and voting rights. These rights were restored with difficulty. They are still living like half-citizens. Ending this repressive regime over the plantation workers and bringing them justice is a core component of a political party of the working people.

■ Gender justice:

Even though 52% of the population of our country is constituted of women, the prevailing socio-economic system has failed to protect their economic, political and social rights. The political and economic participation of women is in a very poor state. The indication that the women's political representation is only 6% and their workforce participation is as low as 35% is an underestimation of the role played by them. Although public sector women and men are paid equal wages, there is a gap in the salaries in the private sector, and women are generally paid lower wages. Pregnant women are constructively influenced to quit, and employers are reluctant to pay maternity benefits. Women are subjected to violence and harassment at home, while traveling, in the workplace, at school, and on campus. Not only private laws but even the Land Development Ordinance discriminate the women. In this context, the challenge of achieving gender justice is a challenge of democracy that we confront.

Nature

Economic policies have caused a major environmental crisis around the world. Humans have completely altered the balance between humans and the environment. This change is really done by the capital (Capitalocene). We saw the immediate aftermath of our rapid contribution to this global crisis at Meethotamulla. Forest cover has dangerously reduced. Water and air polluted.

With regard to the environmental crisis, we should emphasize the relationship between the environment and human beings. As human beings we are not cognizant of the environment and its existence. The theory of cheapening does not discriminate between animals and humans as it prioritizes things that can be discarded after being used for the development (disposable things). That is why we, fighting for a living wage, decent work conditions and more employment opportunities, have to extend to our struggle to include the rights of animals and future generation.

Society

We often think of society as an area disconnected from economics and politics. But economic and political inequalities are reflected

in social relationships as well. These social problems can be seen when we glance daily newspapers.

▶ Alcohol and drug addiction

Estate, rural and urban people are addicted to alcohol. Low-income people are particularly addicted to this, and a large proportion of their income spent on alcohol. It is reported that about 65 people die daily due to alcohol consumption. In the meantime, we also know that there is a mafia in the country which is earning billions of rupees by trading liquor and narcotics and a significant proportion of that income seep into the political class.

▶ Road accidents

Police reports indicate that the number of people who die and get injured due to road accidents is very high in this competitive society that forces everyone to move fast. Road accidents as well as daily traffic congestion are the result of lack of a clear public transport policy

▶ Suicides

The number of suicides reported in Sri Lanka in 2018 is 3218. Out of these, 238 suicides were due to financial issues, poverty and indebtedness. More than 60 percent of the suicides are classified as unemployed.

▶ Under-Age Marriages

There has been a very serious discussion in the recent past regarding the possibility of under-age marriages under the Muslim marriage and divorce law. Muslim laws which facilitate underage marriages are only one reason for this problem. This problem can be seen commonly in rural and estate communities in general and among urban low-income communities.

▶ Drug related crimes and child abuse

Child abuse and drug abuse are a terrifying monster that is destroying the younger generation. It is no secret that renowned politicians and businessmen are linked to these anti-social industries.

Culture

With the consolidation of authoritarian and religious political forces, cultural and artistic rights are restricted. Recent example of this trend is the imprisonment of a

writer named Shaktika Sathkumara for more than three months for writing a book. Other examples include state policies such as film censorship and ban. On the other hand, there is a tendency among the people to shrink public space and confine themselves to narrow cultural identities. One of the major developments is the strengthening of the opinion of religious institutions (such as Mahanayakas, Bishops and the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama) and religious morality when making common policy decisions.

In addition to censorship on art and culture, working people have no income or time to enjoy a work of art. As such, classic art is considered a privilege of for the rich.

There is a tremendous power behind art which enable it to educate the masses against economic and political oppression. Famous peoples' artists such as Victor Hara of Chile, Gunadasa Kapuge and Gamini Hattotuwegama in Sri Lanka are exemplary. Contrary to bridging the gap between ordinary people and art, what has happened is monetization and elitization of the art.

Diplomatic arena

Relations between Sri Lanka and the rest of the world are in crisis more than ever before. Sri Lanka has been made a playground for the regional powers as well as superpowers in the Indian Ocean region. This has compromised the country's independence and sovereignty. The United States is forcing Sri Lanka to sign agreements to allow its troops with easy access to the country. The United States is prepared to pay a total of $ 480 million to help lead to the signing of such agreements. The decision to hand over Diego Garcia to its natives has intensified US influence in Sri Lanka.■

The Challenges Before Us 8

8. The Challenges Befour Us

We are not saying that the ruling class has no answer to this multifaceted crisis. We can already hear the answers they are proposing. The first solution, the debt state phase is over. Now they are proposing to completely open all markets such as labor, capital, land and foreign exchange. Some of the ruling class is nationalist, while others propose to enslave the country. Imposing new monstrous laws to bring about those reforms and taking actions outside the law will institute a rigid authoritarian regime.

The solution of the ruling class is barbaric. It is beyond the barbarism we have experienced so far

Although the challenge before us is multi-faceted, we can summarize it in one sentence.

We simply do not have a powerful instrument to fight with the challenges we face. The battle is huge. But our armoury is empty.

Even though the 2019 presidential election is close by, this weakness has silenced us. We cannot field

our own candidate and we do not like to ask others to vote for this candidate or that candidate. This alternative is not yet made. We have potentials for that. But to transform those potentials into alternatives takes a long journey.

We need to make that journey. Somehow, we need to face setbacks and hurdles and make that journey. We need to be reflexive of our past mistakes, wrong turns to prevent such missteps from recurring.

Working people can intervene actively and effectively in elections on the political arena or in mass struggles only by forming their own independent political party. It is not a single leap but the result of a long and complicated process. We mentioned earlier that this experiment was attempted in 1928 and 1935. We recollect that this idea re-emerged between 1981-84. Political system that will enable an active intervention of working people could only be effective and accurate when it is linked to an international effort. We live in a globalized society. Instead of neo-liberal globalization, we should move towards a globalization based on cooperation and equality. Accordingly, we should begin this endeavor by establishing links with the subaltern classes which constitute the social base in the South Asian region.

There are many facets to the challenge of building a party of the working people.

First, given the possibility for the ruling class to move towards an authoritarian regime as a solution to the crisis, the working class must work to expand the space by expanding democratic rights. At the moment, the rights of the working people and grants they enjoy must be protected from the neo-liberal onslaught. These demands were articulated by independent trade unions and mass organizations in their May Day Declaration.

In this context,

1. Prevent the introduction of new laws that curtail democratic rights, such as the Counter Terrorism Act and essential services act.

2. Lobby wherever possible against attempts to transfer public property to international wealth hunters.

3. To tear up treaties that could open Sri Lanka as a battlefield for the global superpowers.
4. Defeat the farmer's land grabbing plans by decrees such as the proposed land act.
5. Mobilize struggles against deprivation of workers' rights, such as pension rights.
6. Mobilizing struggles to defeat repealing laws affecting workers' rights which may eliminate the category of permanent employment.

Secondly, we need to find a way out of the contemporary crisis and formulate a course of actions that would liberate the working people and all other oppressed people. We should also clarify the transitional process towards such a liberation pathway. In this regard,

1. To initiate far-reaching reforms to create a social system based on the collective ownership and control over the processes of production, exchange and distribution for those who create such processes;
2. Since these processes do not function in the same way in industries, services and agriculture, we need to Identify reforms based on such changes;
3. Introducing a common regulatory mechanism in the transport sector and assure free education and free health by resisting commercialization of these sectors;
4. The establishment of large development banks as a state monopoly and a regulatory mechanism to orient the banking and finance sector in line with the state ownership and the national economic policy;
5. Prioritizing use value instead of exchange value to minimize all possible consequences on other organisms and the environment in the production, exchange and distribution processes and introducing reuse and recycling as well as cutting down on unnecessary consumption;

will be emphasized.

Thirdly, a transformation for social emancipation requires a strong political regime. In its implementation, we should ensure continuous and active involvement

of working people and recognize the identities of Tamils, Muslims and other minorities and ethnicities by constructing a state structure which will enable them to participate in the political process. Following proposals are made for achieving these objectives,

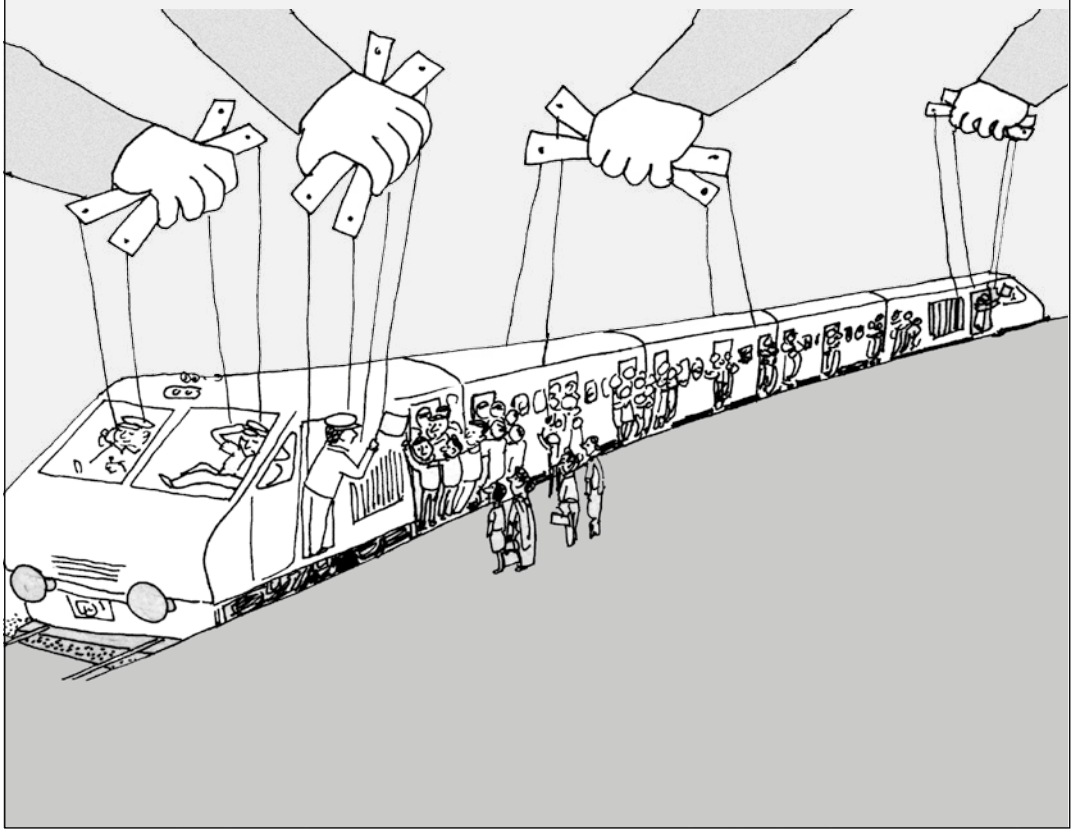
1. To convene a Constituent Assembly to draft a new Constitution.
2. Setting up of village, township units (wards) and workplace-based units as the base of the new state and the formation of central government through regional, district and provincial boards subject to a systematic jurisdiction.
3. Abolition of rewards to the public representatives beyond what the public receive, and the establishment of a formal mechanisms for the general public to recall their representatives.
4. Emphasize on the state reforms that would uphold the ability of numerically small communities and ethnic groups to exercise their power and rights.
5. To safeguard and ensure all forms of freedom of the trade unions and mass organizations.
6. Making supervision by working peoples' overseeing committees an essential part of governance to eliminate corruption and irregularities.

Fourth, the country's foreign policy will be formulated to ensure national independence and global peace and security. All forms of imperialist thrusts and influences will be vehemently rejected. It is only through close collaboration with the global working people's movements that imperialist attacks and conspiracies could be encountered.

In this process,

1. Preventing conflicts of superpowers in the Indian Ocean region and vigorously campaigning for the Indian Ocean region to be declared a No War Zone.
2. Terminating war agreements with superpowers and all agreements towards such ends and refusing to enter into new such agreements.
3. To adopt a friendly policy based on the principle of non-alignment with all countries. ■

9 What is to be done?



9. What is to be done?

We won't be able to overcome the challenges discussed so far without the active and organized involvement of the working people through their autonomous organizations. It is imperative to make their organizations independent of the direct and indirect interference and influence of the ruling class. It must not be forgotten that the rulers armed with media, power, and money are working to encircle and incapacitate the freedom and independence of mass organizations. The following are the two strategies they use frequently. The first is to show an imaginary common enemy. The entire ruling class is a common enemy for us. The friendship shown by one group will undoubtedly be a cup of poison. Therefore, the principle; the entire ruling class is the common enemy, should drive our action.

The second is to bring ethnic and religious divisions to the working peoples' movement. Racism and religious divisions are reactionary and regressive no matter who brought it. It is not the world that working people are aspiring for. As a class, the nationality and the religion of the working people is collective social liberation.

As mentioned earlier, an alternative working peoples' power can only be built against the organizations and power of the ruling class, by

forming and developing a party of working people and, in due course, by taking over state power. It is the only way. We have foregone this need three times. Today we must make a strong grip on it so that we won't lose it.

This cannot be done by subcontracting it to a selected group of the elite among the working people. This requires a mass training program targeting the entire working class. This training could primarily be obtained through practice.

The working peoples' party will not be just a party built for the working class as a whole. It will also be steered by themselves. Therefore, it is their own party. It will be supported with their money. It gains life by the sacrifices of working people. Working people must, therefore, be vigilant about where the party is heading. We do not rule out the possibility of entry by some sections from the ruling class for various reasons. We shouldn't be over-suspicious about them. We would accept their knowledge and strength with gratitude. But let's tell them one thing. We have burnt our fingers so many times. And it's not just only in this country. We have experienced it many times in the world. Therefore, the steering wheel of the working peoples' party must be in the hands of the working people.

As working people think in different ways and are influenced differently by different forces, it is natural that different opinions and different strategies are to be found in the working people's party. There must be a democratic framework to discuss these ideas.

We won't be able to stop this system of slavery and the shift of this civilization towards barbarism unless we create and maintain a mass party of working people. We already have some trade unions and mass organizations independent of the ruling class. They should be prepared to take the next step. The History and the Future belongs to us. ■

A Party for Whom? And For What?

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Rs. 250