

# *The Socialists and the Nationalist Movement in Sri Lanka 1931-1948: I*

— M. U. DE SILVA

---

The introduction of the Universal Suffrage and the Executive Committee system and the abolition of communal representations on the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission was considered a distinct advance on the existing constitution by a major section of the bourgeoisie, organized under the leadership of the Ceylon National Congress formed in 1919, which was at the beginning opposed to universal suffrage. These members showed their inclination to collaborate with the rulers by the acceptance of universal suffrage and by enthusiastic participation in the general elections in order to use the State Council as a platform to press for further changes. Though they aimed at self-government, the new constitution was a distinct advance on the former and empowered them to undertake a great deal of constructive work and to identify themselves closely with the people.

A section of the Ceylon National Congress which did not agree with the stand taken by the majority of the Congress separated from the main body, and having organized itself under the "All Ceylon Liberal League" condemned the Donoughmore Constitution as 'diarchy pure and simple' and decided to enter the State Council to "mend or end the Constitution".<sup>1</sup> The members pledged to reform the constitution so as to remove its reactionary and objectionable features and to obtain the introduction of local self-government through out the country.

The Independent Labour Party which had been formed in July 1927, participated in the general elections with the object of gaining a true democratic and representative form of government, and a substantial extension of the labour legislation for the benefit of the workers. The Unionist Party formed in August 1927, also campaigned at the general elections for a bi-cameral constitution. The Labour Party which had been formed in 1927, stood for universal suffrage and being the main political instrument of the organized workers of the industrial sector willingly took part in the general elections. The new constitution, it was thought, would pave the way to obtain greater trade union rights and labour legislation.

1. *Ceylon Daily News*, 27th April 1931

The radical youths on the other hand took a different stand and they looked upon the Order in Council of 1931 as an impudent challenge of British Imperialism to the national self-respect of the people, and they decided to boycott the elections.

This youth movement found its beginnings in the Students Congress held at the Rigdeway Hall, Jaffna in December 1924, with the aim of (1) reviving national art, literature and music, (2) making Ceylon economically independent, and (3) training the youth for National Services - in particular to work for the realization of the ideals of a United Ceylonese Nation. The formation of this Students Congress introduced the radical youths interested in the national regeneration into the political arena of the country via various youth leagues formed in various parts of the island. At the beginning they too stood for social welfare, but within a short time gradually drifted towards political goals.

The first breakthrough was witnessed in 1926 when a few militant youths challenged the methods adopted by the government for the Poppy Fund collection on Armistice Day, i.e., 11th November. The letters written to the press by James T. Rutnam, an active youth leaguer, along with some others challenging the course of action of the government appeared on 6th November 1926, and on the following day, a group of radical youths from the Ceylon Law College organized a public meeting to protest against the Poppy Fund.<sup>2</sup> This largely attended meeting, held at the Tower Hall, Colombo was chaired by G. K. W. Perera, with James T. Rutnam as the Secretary. The speakers boldly criticized the methods adopted and condemned the use of official authority for raising such subscriptions.

In a few years the activities of the youth leaguers gradually spread into the Sinhala areas, especially along the coastal belt around Colombo assuming a character of an anti-imperialistic movement.

However, there was no uniformity or consistency in their actions and therefore it was felt that co-ordination of youth league activities was essential. To achieve this an all Ceylon Youth Congress was held in May 1931, and a broad outline of the activities to be pursued was framed. Furthermore, at this Congress sessions, it was decided to launch a boycott movement of foreign goods and also of imperial celebrations such as the King's birthday.<sup>3</sup> A further step forward was taken at the all Ceylon Youth League Committee on 8th June 1931, when it decided to change its object to that of gaining political independence and national liberation.<sup>4</sup> To buttress their efforts they decided to regenerate the national pioneer guard corps. Further they turned

2. *Ceylon Daily News*, 6th November 1926

3. *Svadēśā Mitrāyā*, 27th May 1931.

4. *Ibid.* 10th June 1931.

their attention to the educational system which they believed to be the chord which held the imperial bondage which was injurious to Ceylon's political, cultural and economic well-being. They demanded the implementation of a national system of education in Swabasha.<sup>5</sup>

The youth movement in Sri Lanka changed its aims from social welfareism to political leadership due to a close association with the political questions connected with the Donoughmore reforms. This was further stimulated by the addresses delivered by two left wing members of the Indian National Congress, Jawaharlal Nehru and Kamala Devi Chattopadyaya who visited Sri Lanka during the latter part of 1931. During the course of the year Youth Leaguers began to concentrate on their anti-imperialistic role and carried out boycott movements especially those that were in line with the aspirations of the Indian Swadeshi Movement.

Terence N. de Zylva, a militant youth attached to the Colombo South Youth League, in a booklet published in support of the boycott of the celebrations connected with the King's birthday ridiculed the loyalty expressed by the Ceylonese to the British King.<sup>6</sup> He recognized the king as the symbol of exploitation to which the country had been subjected for centuries, leading to the disintegration of the economic and cultural values of the indigenous society. Emphasising the historical phenomena, he addressed the youth, thus: "How long will you be blind to the evil fate that has overtaken us?..... Slaves we are today, and slaves we shall be, if we tolerate this slavery any longer. Let us not be deceived. The Empire means the death-knell to the freedom of nations and individuals. It is the Dragon that has laid waste our country. Therefore let us awake and work for our freedom. Look to India and learn from her the courage to suffer and struggle for liberty. Boycott the puppet shows, the glittering parades, treacherous titles and all this imperial buffoonery and stagecraft with which your loyalty is bought (sic) over..... Don't be duped to sell your soul and your country's honour. Beware of this Vampire.

Arise, O Lanka, and unite in the battle of freedom  
Arise, and join hands with India"<sup>7</sup>

In 1932 the youth leaguers started their monthly journal "Young Ceylon" through which they carried forward their political campaign. In its first issue an attack was launched against the leadership in the State Council. In an editorial under the heading "A Great Betrayal" they charged the leadership for not attempting to save the country from economic bondage and saw the State Council as a "dismal and ghostly failure"<sup>8</sup>. In this context they argued that the youth had come forward with clear and distinct ideals for complete

5. *The Morning Leader*, 24th December 1931.

6. Terence N. de Zylva, *The King - the Empire*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Young Ceylon*, May 1932

independence, economic stability and national solvency.<sup>9</sup> To limit political progress by seeking the status of a self-governing Dominion, according to them, was to barter away inherent rights. They argued that the political organisations should be mass movements, disciplined like an army and surging its way forward until the goal was reached. They further stressed that in such a movement there could be no room for organized cliques, powerful combines and high-brow political cabals, and argued that the salvation of the country could not be secured by associations bearing such features.<sup>10</sup>

The youth leaguers further stressed that it was not possible to break the fetters which bound the nation to the chariot-wheel of British Imperialism until the country achieved full control of its political destiny. The economic burdens were imposed upon the nation mostly by the alien government and the European mercantile community.<sup>11</sup> They argued further that politics and economics were inextricably intertwined. Unless the nation is cautioned on both ends and achieve emancipation simultaneously, achievement of one would further complicate the problem. Therefore they directed their movement towards political and economic freedom.<sup>12</sup>

While the youth movement was getting politically motivated in Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan Students Association in London was busy commenting on the constitutional changes in Sri Lanka.<sup>13</sup> At its annual dinner at the Restaurant Frascali in London in 1931, Vallabhai Patel, ex-president of the Imperial Legislative Assembly, Delhi, delivered a vigorous speech on the price of freedom of which a summary was published in the "Ceylon Daily News".<sup>14</sup> In this speech he referred to the role of the liberation movement in Sri Lanka and stressed the importance of a dynamic leadership.

By this time the Sri Lanka Students Association was dominated by a group of students, who had come under the influence of socialist thinking and who were inspired by the Indian Nationalist Movement. They were actively participating with the leaders of the Left-Wing of the British Labour Party, the British Communist Party and the Indian Communist students group in London.<sup>15</sup> Several of these Sri Lankan students who had been introduced to a study of the theory of socialist philosophy in the class-rooms of the London School of Economics and Social Sciences, had close contact with international revolutionaries such as Ranjan Palm Dutt, Harry Politt, Krishna Menon, Saklatwala and C. L. R. James, and gained a first hand

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Young Ceylon*, August 1932

12. *Young Ceylon*, June 1932.

13. At the Indian Students' Hostel in Bloomsbury, London, S. A. Wickramasinghe, Colvin R. de Silva, Phillip Gunawardane, N. M. Perera and Leslie Goonwardane met constantly and discussed the building up of a national movement in Sri Lanka. They all agreed on the backwardness of Sri Lankan leaders and their smug complacency and self-satisfaction.

14. *Ceylon Daily News*, 8th July 1931

15. V. K. Jayawardane, *Modern Ceylon Studies* I, 1971, pp. 195 ff.

experience in socialist activities through membership in various communist organisations. This group included Colvin R. de Silva, N. M. Perera, Phillip Gunawardena, Leslie Goonawardene, T. S. Fernando and Brito Mutunayagam who belonged to land-owning families and the liberal professions.

These youngsters were pursuing their learning at a time when the Western world was in the midst of the vast unemployment and industrial unrest caused by the depression. The impact of the Indians striving for national independence, the rising tide of doctrinal radicalism after the fall of Ramsey Mac Donald and the Labour Party further stimulated these radical minded intellectuals<sup>16</sup>. In their deliberations these students identified the lethargic character of the nationalist movement in Sri Lanka as something due to lack of a militant and clear leadership.

As we have seen earlier, by the time these youths returned to the island, several young lawyers and others had moved to radical or radical socialist positions through the youth league movement, thus clearing the way for a radical nationalist movement. Since their arrival they worked in close collaboration with the youth leaguers and their influence gave a new direction to the embryonic radical socialist movement.

The new direction was signalled by an article contributed by Dr. Colvin R. de Silva to the September 1932 issue of the "Young Ceylon" entitled "A New Religion". In this he gave a vivid description of the Russian system and identified the Russian political philosophy as a doctrine of strict equality and true mutuality and its basis as materialism. He further wrote that planning in Russia was done for a full life for every body in the present rather than on preaching some illusive future on the motto of each according to his ability, to each according to his needs, and all for each and each for all. The doctrine further emphasized that the things of the world were the property of the world, and therefore no person or a class had a claim for a bigger share.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile Aelian Perera, the President of the Ex-Servicemen's Association started a campaign to sell Suriya Mal on 11th November 1931, to collect funds for the Ceylonese Ex-soldiers and for local charities.<sup>18</sup> This was a challenge to the Poppy Movement, and since there was general dissatisfaction with British Imperialism, and since Aelian Perera was the President of the All Ceylon Youth League Congress, the move received unexpected support from the Youth Leaguers, though it was started independently of the Youth Movement. A committee was appointed<sup>19</sup> to launch the Suriya

16. G. T. Lerski, 1968, pp. 10-11.

17. *Young Ceylon*, September 1932

18. *Ceylon Independent*, 11th November 1931

19. Suriya Mal Committee of 1931:

President: Aelian Perera, Vice President: A. E. Goonesinghe, S. W. Dassanayake, Secretary : N. Saravanamuttu, Assistant Secretary : O. M. Jansz, Treasurer : C. W. Nicholas, Committee : R. L. Pereira, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, Dr. R. Saravanamuttu, I. David, S. J. Akbar, G. G. Ponnambalam, Merril Perera, E. B. Weerakoon, C. S. Samaraweera, C. W. de Silva, Nilan J. de Mel, Wilfred Gunasekera, W. Obeyesinghe, C. W. Edirisooriya, C. Arndt, R. Aluvihare, P. Givendrasinghe, Valentyn S. Perera, George Caldera, Walter Fernando, D. J. Amadoru

Mal Campaign, and posters were issued to advertise the move. However, the movement was limited to the towns of Colombo, Kandy, Matale, Kalutara, Panadura, Moratuwa, Galle and Matara where the youth movement was active. Suriya Mal were sold at any price, five cents upwards. Though the British officials tried to curb the movement even the Suriya Mal sellers were surprised by the public support they received.<sup>20</sup> The demand for Suriya Mal was so great that they were sold out in a few minutes in many places.<sup>21</sup> However, the Principals of certain Schools and Colleges<sup>22</sup> refused permission to the Suriya Mal sellers to enter the school premises and threatened to turn out students who wore Suriya Mal. Musaeus College was a centre of activity of the Suriya Mal sellers while the other schools of the city of Colombo allowed both Poppy and Suriya Mal sellers to enter their schools.

The Suriya Mal campaign created a great interest in the towns where it was conducted. Wherever the Youth Movement was strong it created a new environment for rousing anti-imperialistic feelings. This new development alarmed the Ex-Servicemen's Association and in the following year the project was dropped by them. But the enthusiasm created by the move, the support extended by the masses and the experience which they had gained tempted the Colombo Central Youth League to continue the movement. By this time the Youths who had launched the socialist movement in Europe were busy in alliance with the Leaguers. They took over the Suriya Mal Movement and launched an attack on British Imperialism.

In this new movement Doreen W. Wickramasinghe, the Principal of Ananda Balika Vidyalaya was chosen the President while Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and S. Somasundaram acted as the trustees of the Fund.<sup>23</sup> The objects of the fund were further expanded with a view to forming a nucleus for furthering and promoting the cause of National Independence, the establishment of scholarships in industry, agriculture and art, the translation of foreign literature into Sinhala and Tamil, and the encouragement of creative original work and Swadeshi enterprises. The new move further antagonized the imperialists and the entire machinery of the government was used against the movement. Newspapers carried articles condemning the movement as a crude political move organised entirely by the Youth Movement<sup>24</sup>. In retaliation the Youth Leaguers while condemning the British attitude appealed to the nation to unite in the battle to establish a Socialist Democratic Ceylon.<sup>25</sup> They identified the movement as a call for the sons and daughters of Lanka to rise and set her free.<sup>26</sup>

20. Ceylon Independent, 16th November 1931

21. At Matale, Suriya Mal were sold out in half an hour. At Moratuwa there was no sale of poppies.

22. The Principals of leading Christian colleges such as Wesley, Ladies, Bishop's, St. Joseph's and Methodist did not allow the Suriya Mal sellers to enter their schools.

23. Ceylon Daily News. 10th May 1933

24. Ceylon Independent, 11th November 1933

25. The Searchlight, 18th October 1933

26. Ibid.

The aims of the movement were clear and the Suriya Mal organisers declared that it was launched with two objects in view. Firstly, to prevent Lanka's money going out to help the British Empire to wage wars for the purpose of partitioning the world, and secondly, to promote and further the movement for national independence by re-juvenating the masses.<sup>27</sup> The organisers paid greater attention to the latter objective and tried to generate a mass movement for national freedom. In an article to the "Searchlight", Terence N. de Zylva, wrote thus: "Today we are completely de-nationalized ..... We have lost our culture, our language, our customs and ways of life, our dress and our soul itself. We are supposed to acquire a culture from Oxford or London, brought to us by man and degrees. So the spirit of the aliens becomes absorbed into the spirit of Lanka. If we are to regain our manhood we must drink deep from the springs of that glorious past because something of life has been there".

"A Lanka free from servile bonds, what is the Freedom? It is Freedom from obstacles which hitherto have stood in the way both of growth of injustice, freedom from the ugly way of brute force. It means freedom from vulgar pride of wealth, domination and from monopolies of necessities of life by self-seeking capitalists."<sup>28</sup>

In this great struggle the duty of the school was to train the youngsters to be free and useful citizens of the land of birth.<sup>29</sup> Therefore they stressed more the need for a proper system of national education.

The leadership provided by the socialist youths to the Suriya Mal Movement was more systematic and dynamic. They organised public meetings to educate the masses on the objects of the movement. The leaders of the movement such as Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, Dr. N. M. Perera, Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe, Phillip Gunawardene, Leslie Goonawardena and A. W. H. Abegunawardena addressed the masses, and local committees were formed to carry out the propaganda work.<sup>30</sup> The Suriya Mal campaign against the Poppy day celebrations was thus placed on a firm footing and a new impetus was given to the nationalist movement.

The close association of the socialists in the youth league activities and their active role in the Suriya Mal movement was not approved by the moderates who still clung on to the social welfare policy. They resented the anti-imperialistic attitude of the Socialists, and this led to a split in the Youth League movement. On the invitation of Valentyn S. Perera, a congress of Youth Leaguers was summoned in November 1934, to settle the differences and to achieve unanimity regarding the aims of the movement and the programme of work.<sup>31</sup> Among those present were S. Caldera,

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Searchlight*, 11th November 1934

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ceylon Independent*, 1st November 1934

31. *Ceylon Independent*, 14th November 1934

Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe, Edmund Samarakkody, Stanley de Zoysa, A. Padmanadan, M. Oliver Fernando, N. Kumarasingham, E. A. & A. C. Weerasekera, B. J. Fernando, W. Austin Fernando, V. G. Gunasekera, Phillip Gunawardena and George Caldera. At this discussion the political independence of Sri Lanka was reaffirmed as the object of the Youth Congress<sup>32</sup>. It further saw the need for the awakening of the country to the development of its industrial resources. At the same time the usefulness of entering the State Council was considered. After a lengthy discussion it was agreed to consider the State Council as an instrument which could be advantageously used in the struggle for national independence. The argument was to use "the very devil's contraption" created by others for their own purposes.<sup>34</sup> The decision was therefore taken to enter the State Council.

Meanwhile slow changes were taking place in the Trade Union field. The advent of Goonasinghe into Trade Union leadership and the birth of the Ceylon Labour Union in 1922, paved the way for the formation of an All Ceylon Trade Union Congress affiliated to international labour organisations. It led several victorious strikes combatting the might of the employers. However, Goonasinghe later on turned out to be a mild negotiator, and K. Natesa Iyar, an associate of Goonasinghe, dissociated himself from Goonesinghe and started mobilizing the labour in the plantation areas.

It was at this juncture that the Youth Leaguers were drawn into the field of Trade Union activity due to a strike at the Wellawatta Spinning and Weaving Mills concerning a dispute regarding the reduction of wages of the employees. Though the entire labour force struck work they did not get the anticipated support from the Trade Union Leader Goonesinghe. However, the events that followed brought the Youth Leaguers into the scene.<sup>35</sup> As a result, on 23rd February 1933, at a mass meeting of the workers, the Wellawatta Workers Union was formed with Dr. Colvin R. de Silva as President and Vernon Gunasekera and J. W. Seneviratne as the Joint Secretaries.

The mill management refused to recognize the new leadership and the government too kept silent for a considerable period. In the meantime, Goonasingha used his power to obstruct the course of action of the new leadership by raising the communal cry as most of the strikers were of Indian origin and also by supplying blacklegs to the mill management. However, in the end, the government intervened and the strike was settled.

Among the consequences one saw the gradual emergence of Trade Union Organisations under the Youth Leaguers. On account of their theoretical acquaintance the Youth Leaguers realized the need for working-class unity and solidarity to exert economic pressure in order to achieve political

32. *Ibid*

33. *Ceylon Independent*, 24th December 1934

34. *Ibid*.

35. For details see V. K. Jayawardane, 1971, pp. 195 ff.



liberation. They had to break through communal pressure and for this purpose a proper education for the workers was considered vital. Therefore, in 1934 they started establishing reading rooms and night schools for the workers so as to give them a general understanding of world affairs. They also expected to demonstrate to the Lankan workers that they were not to be isolated in their struggle, but were tied up internationally with the solidarity and brotherhood of workers. The need was felt for a more forceful medium to espouse the cause of the workers, bringing forth the heroic struggles of the workers outside Sri Lanka.<sup>36</sup> They organized the May Day celebrations on a grand scale and occasional meetings were conducted to dwell upon workers' solidarity when there was a major labour issue elsewhere.

Several trade unions were started within a short time, and the unions were occasionally addressed by Youth Leaguers such as Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, Dr. N. M. Perera, Phillip Gunawardana, Leslie Goonawardane and Wilmot A. Perera whereby an understanding of the workers' role and their rights was given to the workers. Meanwhile the trade unions demanded an 8 - hour working day, relief schemes for the unemployed, equal pay for similar work, the recognition of workers' rights and full national independence for the country.<sup>37</sup>

However, the establishment and the structure of the government and the private sector management were such that the workers were hesitant to approach the authorities to discuss their problems. The social barriers had kept the masters and servants apart. It was therefore left to the Youth Leaguers to preside at discussions and to lead the labour unions in their struggles. In these matters Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, Leslie Goonawardane, Vernon Gunasekera, Dr. N. M. Perera and Philip Gunawardane played a leading role.

The government realising the impending danger in this development, drafted legislation to curb the Trade Union activities of this group. The draft Trade Union Act of 1935 based on the English Trade Union Act of 1927 subsequently was brought before the State Council stipulating that all trade unions should be registered. It prohibited outsiders from playing an active role in organising such unions and from belonging officially to such unions. The Youth Leaguers with the support of the radicals in the Council registered a vehement protest against the provisions of the ordinance as they cut at the root of militant trade unionism and succeeded in getting the obnoxious clauses (regarding outsiders organising such unions) amended.

Simultaneously the Youth Leaguers tried to organise the rural peasantry, by way of Farmers' Associations and Rural Reconstruction Society Welfare Centres. In this venture they paid special attention to the problems of the farmers. They saw the need for a change of landlordism, the introduction of new techniques and high yielding varieties. In addition they

36. *Kamkaruvā*, the paper started by the youth leaguers in March 1934 did not last more than a year.

37. *Kamkaruvā*, 20th April 1934

emphasised the need for breeding cattle for milk, agriculture and meat, for which they clamoured for communal pasture lands.<sup>38</sup> The Youth Leaguers held an islandwide farmers' congress on the Poson Full Moon day of 1934 at Anuradhapura, where the needs of the farmers were discussed and a programme for future action was drawn up. In keeping with the aspiration of the Youth Leaguers, Wilmot A. Perera compiled "A Socio-Economic Survey of the Raigam Korale"<sup>39</sup> on behalf of the Raigam Korale Rural Reconstruction Society Welfare Centre. However this interest died down as the Youth Leaguers later engaged themselves more in malaria relief work and party propaganda work.

The Youth Leaguers also took an interest in the educational system of Sri Lanka. By this time 81% of all the school-going children of the country attended vernacular schools, where a general and academic instruction of a non-vocational nature was provided. Though a system of free compulsory primary education was in force, more than 72% ceased schooling due to poverty. Admission to an English school was a privilege for a villager, and the absence of a "ladder" for outstanding ability was regarded as an utter inadequacy of the social organisation.<sup>40</sup> The English educated youth belonged to a privileged group which was isolated from the masses. Therefore the Youth Leaguers argued that the educational structure should be rebuilt on the basis of social solidarity and equal opportunity for all.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile Sri Lanka too felt the effects of the general economic depression which for several years had affected the whole world. There had been a severe fall in the prices of export commodities and trade was at a low ebb. To make matters worse a severe drought which broke out in 1932 was followed by heavy rains in October resulting in floods causing damage to houses and property. On the top of this disaster a fever epidemic of unexampled virulence swept over some of the districts. Malaria too contributed its share to this calamity. The epidemic seems to have been without equal in living memory, and the ravages of the disease were most felt by the poorest and the most depressed sections of the community.<sup>42</sup> The official estimate was that nearly one third of the area, and three million out of five and a half million were affected with over 100,000 deaths taking place. With the increasing severity of the epidemic, government and private organisations organized relief work. The government appointed a Commissioner for relief with a vote of half a million rupees for relief work, and utilized the services of the headmen in the distribution of rice, tea, sugar and salt to all needy families affected by fever.<sup>43</sup>

The Suriya Mal activists and the Youth Leaguers organised themselves into a relief squad with Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe, Dr. Mary Rutnam, Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, Dr. N.M. Perera, Phillip, Harry and Robert Gunawardanes,

38. *Ibid.*

39. Wilmot A. Perera, *A Socio-Economic Survey of the Raigam Korale*, Study one, (Colombo 1934) p. 1

40. *Ibid.* pp. 17-20.

41. *Kamkaruvā*, March 1934

42. S. P., V. 1937, pp. 4 ff.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 5 ff.

Leslie Goonawardane and others. They selected some of the worst affected areas around Avissawella, Ruwanwella and Alutnuwara where the impact of feudalism was still strong and visited houses and provided medical relief to the best of their ability.

The Youth Leaguers were convinced that it was primarily malnutrition—the result of colonial exploitation, which caused the people to suffer and die. Therefore they requested that nutrition work should be made a special branch of the medical and sanitary services. They blamed the government for the neglect of the peasantry during the critical years of depression, drought and epidemic, and also criticised the manner of organising relief work. Malaria was essentially a problem of poverty according to the Youth Leaguers, who argued that unless the problem of poverty was solved malaria would be a curse to Ceylon either in epidemic or in endemic form. With such arguments they forced the government to provide at least a glass of milk and a mid-day meal to the poorer school children.

The experience gained by the Youth Leaguers, especially the western educated group, in the relief campaign brought about a new outlook in them. They had selected for their relief work the most affected areas where the impact of feudalism was still strong. This made them realize the importance of a political force which could pierce the very heart of feudal power. The national leaders of the day were utilising the feudal forces and were not concerned with the problems facing the villagers. The necessity of a political party with a radical nationalist programme to break through this barrier soon became evident to the Leaguers.

Through the impact of world forces, the influence of socialist progressive movements and the advance of scientific thought had reached the Island and had resulted in a socialist movement; and its activities were limited to the urban areas. Even the leaders of the Youth Movement were not fully aware of the conditions prevalent in the interior, where the traditional leadership had their strongholds. The poor, illiterate and helpless villagers were oppressed by the semi-feudal machinery which propped up the power and prestige of the socially superior.

It is in the context of this political background that the most active members of the Youth Leagues assembled at Lorenz College in Skinners Road, Maradana, on 18th December 1935, and formed themselves into a political party with a clear-cut socialist policy for the purpose of undertaking a broad-based programme of political and trade union activity. The then popular term for socialism, “Samasamājaya”, was selected as the name of the party. The fundamental object of the party was the establishment of a socialist society for which they put forward the following demands: (a) the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange of commodities, (b) attainment of National Independence, and (c) abolition of political and economic inequality and oppression arising from differences of class, race, caste or creed. The membership was open to all those who upheld the programme and paid a small contribution.

The new party held that the imperialist government had only covered the "sores of the national evils with balm whilst the cancer steadily grew beneath": The party proclaimed that these social evils rooted in the fabric of the national life could only be eliminated by a concrete and complete change of the social, economic and political system and through the establishment of a free democratic state for which an organisation and leadership was vital.

With the formation of the party an effort was made to unite all anti-imperialist forces under one banner. For this the Ceylonese youth were acquainted with the new political philosophy through the medium of cadre classes, conducted by the prominent leaders of the party where the problems of the day were analysed and discussed. Simultaneously political questions were brought to the people through the party political paper.<sup>44</sup> Likewise attempts were made to bring about a unity among the progressive trade unions. For this purpose discussions were held to bring about a unity with the Labour Party,<sup>45</sup> and a joint May Day rally was organized in 1937. But the anticipated unity did not materialize and the Labour Party drifted towards the Ceylon National Congress.

The dissolution of the first State Council took place within a month of the formation of the new party and three prominent members contested the election on the party ticket, and another independent with party support. At the election Dr. N. M. Perera and D. P. R. Gunawardane were elected. While the only Marxist member of the first State Council, Dr. S. A. Wickramasinghe lost his seat. Leslie Goonawardane who contested as an independent candidate with party support lost his election.

British imperialist control over the masses of Sri Lanka continued to rest mainly on the bureaucracy, the police, the planters, the headmen and the class consciousness of the bourgeoisie. As the anti-imperialist movement grew stronger, the Sri Lankan capitalist class became more class conscious and counter revolutionary. They utilized the political advantages provided by the new constitution to strengthen their position and to suppress the new political awakening.

The Ceylon National Congress representing the bourgeoisie directly opposed the revolutionary tactics of the Samasamajists and agitated for Dominion Status. They accepted the Donoughmore constitution with reluctance as the lesser of two evils, and tried to get the constitution amended in the direction of a cabinet system, through memoranda submitted to the Secretary of State, backed up with lobbying at the Colonial Office.

The bureaucracy, on the other hand, was adjusting itself to the changing times. The Ministers, though anxious to see their own people in the higher posts, did not like to see the European Civil Servants leaving the service.

44. "Samasamājaya", the *Sinhala* paper, was started on 10th July 1936, the English version "Samasamajist" on 5th June 1937, and "Samadharman" in Tamil in 1938.

45. *Samasamājaya*, 28th April 1937.

Therefore heads of departments were appointed to places where such appointments were unnecessary in order to patronise their favourites.<sup>46</sup> However, though there was some sort of dissatisfaction in the bureaucracy, yet they were generally united against the action of the radicals and the Samasamajists. Therefore, the Samasamajists went all out to attack the bureaucracy at all levels.

The British planting interests had a hand in shaping the policy of the administration. The revolutionary activities of the socialists and their Trade Union Organisations in the plantation sector were causes of irritation and apprehension to the planters who, as a result, were forced to seek assistance from the colonial bureaucracy and the police.

At the lowest level of the bureaucracy was the headmen who willingly served the masters in maintaining the status quo. Naturally they were hostile to any innovation or change in the established social system. The headmen system was attacked even by the moderates, and the Samasamajists from their very inception attacked it. The system was corrupt from top to bottom, and bribery, favouritism and nepotism were rampant. Therefore the Samasamajists held that the system must go lock, stock and barrel.<sup>47</sup> A resolution was brought before the State Council to abolish the headmen system, and accordingly steps were taken by the government to abolish the Raṭēmahatmayā system from 1939.

The police was the main arm of the administration with the help of which the masses were kept under control. To bring the masses to the forefront of the national struggle and to lead them forward it was held that a direct attack against the police was necessary. The opportunity arose when the Inspector General of Police, Herbert Dowbigin, retired in January 1937. While the Board of Ministers were busy arranging farewell parties to the retiring Inspector General,<sup>48</sup> the Samasamajists organised a public meeting to condemn the official career of Dowbigin.<sup>49</sup> The radical members of the State Council were among the speakers who addressed the meeting. Simultaneously the party newspapers carried a detailed account of Dowbigin's official career highlighting his cruelties during the carters' strike of 1905, the riots of 1915, and the harassment of the temperance leaders.

At the beginning only a few took an interest in the activities of the Samasamajists. However they soon made their influence felt over the industrial labour organisations and the urban masses. In matters of party discipline the organisation was without any parallel and it appeared that the Samasamajists had supplied Sri Lanka with its first organized party.<sup>50</sup> Samasamajist papers became the vehicle for the expression of mass dissatisfaction,

46. *Hansard*, 12th March 1937, p. 707.

47. *Hansard*, 28th April 1936, p. 1388.

48. *Daily News*, 5th January 1937

49. *Samasamājaya*, 8th January 1937

50. *Young Socialist*, April 1937

and also for the realistic interpretation of events in terms of class interests and their political and economic implications on the mass movement. In attempting to mobilize the masses for the attainment of national independence the party advocated the need for national unity, and the need to combat communalism.<sup>51</sup>

There was throughout the British rule a pronounced gap between the rulers and the ruled. English being the official language only a handful had direct contact with the government. The Samasamajists advocated the conduct of the official work in Svabhāṣā. As a step forward in achieving this they pressed the government to make provision for the introduction of Sinhala and Tamil in the Magistrates' Courts, Courts of Requests and Municipal Courts and also the granting of the right to lodge complaints in Svabhāṣā at the police stations. Though the Council adopted resolutions along these lines steps were not taken by the government to implement them.

The constant fear of victimisation of the workers hindered the progress of trade union activity. The social barrier that separated workers from the middle-class employers and the bureaucrats, and the deferential behaviour normal to the lower classes in their contacts with those of superior status made the vigorous assertion of workers' rights by workers themselves extremely difficult. The fact that the medium of communication was English further aggravated the problem. The necessity for the intervention of outsiders in negotiations thus became clear. Samasamajists therefore moved in as organisers of trade union activities.

The leadership provided by the Samasamajists made a deep impression among the working class and many unions were formed in the public as well as the private sectors. The Samasamajists called for the unity of the working class, for which purpose an attempt was made to ally with the Labour Party on the basis of a legally fixed basic minimum wage, less hours of duty, and stoppage of unjust dismissals.

An attempt was made to mobilize the estate workers amidst the anti-Indian sentiments which retarded its progress. The plantation workers were, by this time, partly organized under the Ceylon Indian Congress. The All Ceylon Estate Workers' Union led by the Samasamajists made a bold attempt to mobilize the plantation labourers on socialist lines. The kaṅgāni system had transformed the labourers to near slaves, and the Superintendents acted quickly against the formation of trade unions as it would lead to the weakening of their power. The planters did not readily allow the employees to form themselves into unions.

---

51. *Resurgent Ceylon*, Vol. 1 No. 1 September 1938.

M. A. L. Bracegirdle, an Australian who had come to Sri Lanka to learn planting, joined the Samasamajists in organising the plantation labour. Frightened by the growth of the popular and militant organisations of the Samasamajists the European Community and the police made arrangements with the Governor, Sir Reginald Stubbs, to serve an order of deportation on Bracegirdle on the basis of a century-old law. The Samasamajists with the full concurrence of Bracegirdle decided to defy the order. Bracegirdle was concealed and the deportation order was opposed in the State Council. Mammoth public meetings were held condemning the action of the Governor, and the party newspapers carried detailed accounts of the incident. An application was also made to the Supreme Court against the Governor's order and the Court held that it was illegal and ordered the release of Bracegirdle. The agitation around the arrest of Bracegirdle gave nationwide publicity to the Samasamajists and established their reputation as an organisation fighting for the democratic rights of the people.

The advent of Samasamajists to the plantation areas brought about a series of strikes beginning with the strike at Kotigala Estate, Bogawantalawa in 1939. This strike arose from an attempt to prevent the organizing of labourers in a trade union. It was settled by the intervention of the Labour Department. The very same reason led to a series of strikes in subsequent months. In Mooloya an attempt of one Sivanadan<sup>52</sup> to organise the labourers and the resistive steps taken by the Superintendent of the estate - Sparling - ended up with the shooting of Govindan, a labourer, by the police.

The Mooloya strike was an attempt to safeguard the legitimate rights of the workers. Though by law the workers had the right to organize themselves in trade unions, the plantation Raj did not allow the labourers to enjoy it. Apart from this the employees were not even allowed to entertain outsiders at their residences. The Samasamajists challenged the arbitrary power of the superintendants and a campaign against it was begun simultaneously through public meetings and the press and in the State Council. They also provided legal assistance on behalf of one Vellasamy<sup>53</sup> who was charged with criminal trespass, and these activities forced the government to appoint a special commission to investigate the matter. Simultaneously with the support of the radical members of the State Council a motion was passed to suspend the trial

---

52. Sivanadan was a teacher attached to Mooloya Estate, who pioneered the movement for the formation of a trade union. He was transferred from one block to another and his household goods were forcibly transported to the transferred block on the order of the Superintendent of the estate and he was later dismissed. This was the immediate cause for the strike. The superintendent refused access to the Regional Secretary Vellasamy who came for the negotiations and he was finally arrested by the police on criminal trespass orders. This led to the confusion which ultimately led to the shooting of Govindan.

53. Vellasamy the Regional Secretary of the All Ceylon Estate Workers' Union was arrested on 3rd January 1940 while he was addressing the strikers at Mooloya. The Superintendent of Police, Robinson, charged Vellasamy for criminal trespass and intimidation and the Magistrate of Kandy sentenced him to three months' rigorous imprisonment.

of Vellasamy.<sup>54</sup> However the Chief Secretary and the Inspector General of Police violated the decision of the State Council, and as a protest the Board of Ministers tendered their resignation.<sup>55</sup> The Samasamajists argued that the resignation of the Ministers should be followed by the resignation of the members of the State Council and by an island-wide strike.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile Sir D. B. Jayatilake moved a motion in the State Council condemning the action of the Governor and the Inspector General of Police as a grave infringement of constitutional rights and threatened not to participate in any proceeding until such rights were restored.<sup>57</sup> However, the Board of Ministers was not keen on a non-co-operation campaign. They had resigned their posts because they found that the situation was intolerable.<sup>58</sup> The Governor, however, satisfied the Board of Ministers by making certain alterations with regard to the issue of orders to heads of department, and the Board of Ministers resumed their posts.

The Samasamajists, however, tried to make a political issue of it. They argued that the Ministers should have complete control over the respective departments under their Ministries. Philip Gunawardane, then gave notice of the following motion:

“The Council, whilst supporting the action of the Ministers in resigning from office as a protest against the Governor’s attempt to take under his control the police and other departments, calls upon the elected members of the State Council to resign their seats and urge the people immediately to prepare for a nation-wide, direct mass struggle against British imperialism for the abolition of the Governor’s powers and the attainment of complete national independence.”<sup>59</sup>

However, the Samasamajists could not fully capitalize on this situation due to the arrest of their leaders and the proscription of the party under emergency regulations.

Thus the trade union struggle created not only labour issues but also political ones. In the end an agreement was reached between the Estate Management and the trade union leaders. The employer, while recognizing

54. On 23rd January 1940 a motion was brought before the State Council to appoint a special committee to investigate into the shooting of Govindan at Mooloya and to suspend all criminal proceedings connected with the matter: *Hansard*, 23rd January 1940 p. 28.

55. On 27th February 1940, D. S. Senanayake, the Minister of Agriculture and Lands, tendered his resignation while the other members of the Board of Ministers followed soon after.

56. The editorial of the ‘Samasamājaya’ March 1940, titled, “Dān Itin”. argued that the struggle of the masses against the Governor’s Government had commenced, and the Ministers have resigned. Politics was fast moving, so that every political step had to be clearly defined and placed before the masses. The war with the imperialists had commenced, all the departments and institutions must strike and the mass struggle has to be directed to overthrow imperialism and the bureaucracy and to superimpose the sovereignty of the masses.

57. *Hansard*, 5th March 1940, p. 489

58. *Ibid.* p. 490

59. *Ibid.* p. 480



the trade unions as labour organisations, undertook to allow the employees to join any such trade union, and also agreed to allow free access to the union leaders to enter estates and to discuss labour problems with the unions. On the other hand employees pledged to inform the authorities before deciding on strike action.<sup>60</sup>

The successful conclusion of the Mooloya incident further encouraged trade unionism in the plantation areas which ultimately led to a series of strikes. At this time the planters of Uva tried to keep the Samasamajists out of the District where workers had gone on strike. They succeeded in getting an order from the District Judge of Badulla, Robert Ratnayagam Selladorai, prohibiting the Samasamajists from entering the strike areas. The order was forcibly violated by the Samasamajists<sup>61</sup> who were prosecuted by the police. However, they were acquitted in courts.

The bold steps thus taken by the Samasamajists further encouraged trade union activity. To the estate workers, who had hitherto served the Superintendents and kaṅgānis under servile bondage, the Samasamajists gave new vigour and courage. For instance the strikers at Vewessa formed themselves into Workers Councils, which subsequently the superintendents used as an institution to bring about a better administration in the estate.<sup>62</sup> Such workers' councils were constituted at Attampitiya, King Rose, Moragalle, Demodara, Uduwara, Queen's Town and Vewessa Estates, each with five members selected from among the workers. These councils met at regular intervals and discussed the labour problems with the management, and also looked into the maintenance of law and order.

These continuous struggles in the plantation sector led to a joint discussion between the employers and the Trade Unions. The discussions were held between the Minister for Labour, Industry and Commerce, and the representatives of Planters' Associations and Labour Unions, and a seven point agreement was reached.<sup>63</sup> The Trade Unions were recognized as institutions constituting part and parcel of the democratic system. The planters expressed their willingness to discuss matters in dispute with the unions, failing which both parties agreed to go before the Arbitration Boards.<sup>64</sup>

By this time the activities of the Samasamajists in the plantation areas had frightened the planters. The timid estate workers had become so demanding and arrogant that several clashes between workers and the estate management had taken place. Simultaneously strong anti-imperialist literature consisting of pamphlets in the Sinhala, Tamil and English media

60. *Samasamājaya*, 19th April 1940

61. *Ibid.* 10th May 1940

62. *Ibid.* 17th May 1940

63. Seven Point Agreement of 15th August 1940

64. *Ibid.*

65. T. Y. Wright, *Ceylon in My Times, 1889-1943*, (Colombo 1951) pp. 163 ff.

were being distributed calling upon the people to rise against the imperialist war, exploitation of labour by the planters and business magnates and so forth and to be prepared for the struggle for national freedom.<sup>65</sup>

The British planters in the meantime requested the Secretary of State to suppress the activities of the Samasamajists, because they feared that if the government allowed them to work freely the revolutionary wave might soon go beyond control.<sup>66</sup> This memorial and the secret information provided by the official security sources and the discomfiture of the bourgeoisie of Ceylon could be said to have tempted the colonial office to take action to suppress the socialist movement of Sri Lanka. The Samasamajists proved a definite menace to the war effort, particularly with their new militancy among the restless plantation workers.

Since the inception of the Suriya Mal Movement, the Samasamajists had been against "imperial wars". Whenever the defence budget was taken up in the State Council the two Samasamajists registered their protest against such a vote. In 1936 Philip Gunawardane made his position clear during the defence budget discussion thus:

"We are not ready to fight the battles of the imperialists..... We refuse to be a party to any imperialist war. We are not conscientious objectors. We oppose imperialist war. But we are ready to take our place in the battles of national wars such as wars for the liberation of the working class and the peasantry of the country. We are determined to oppose this vote on defence. As long as we remain in this House we will try our best to prevent even one red cent being spent for the Ceylon Defence Force or any other imperialist army".<sup>67</sup>

The Samasamajists opposed the Defence Force and identified its budget as a purposeless waste of money aimed at providing a holiday for the British army personnel.<sup>68</sup> They also upheld the Leninist premise that imperialist wars were inevitable as long as conflicting interests existed in any part of the world. To them the British fight for Democracy was a fight for colonies, and for the exploitation of the harmless indigenous people with a view to having more markets for their expanding trade. To them the idea of defending democracy was a mockery.

At the same time the Samasamajists identified the current war (World War II) as a war between two imperialist groups, i.e., the 'German Fascist Imperialism' and the 'British and French Imperialism' for the division and redivision of the colonies and semi-colonies.<sup>69</sup> Therefore they refused to be a party to this exploitation. Furthermore, they upheld that the class struggle does not stop because a country is at war, and regarded attempts at supporting the war-effort as a treachery to the working class.<sup>70</sup>

(Continued in next issue)

66. *Ibid*, p. 166

67. *Hansard*, 28th August 1936, p. 1395.

68. *Ibid* 17th November 1936, p. 2906

69. *Ibid* 5th September 1939, p. 3480

70. L. S. Goonawardane, *Third International Condemned*, p. 4