The Origins of the Left Movement in Sri Lanka*

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Nationalist and Labour Agitation

The development of plantation capitalism in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) gave rise to important changes in the class composition and the political superstructure of the country. With this change in the mode of production and the consequent rise of the new classes—the bourgeoisie and the working class—two distinct forms of agitation for political and democratic rights emerged. These were the movement for political reform associated with the development of nationalism, and the labour movement which encompassed strikes, workers' agitation and the formation of trade unions by the working-class. In order to understand the circumstances under which the first Leftist party was formed in Ceylon in 1935, a brief account of the growth of capitalism and the beginnings of labour unrest is necessary.

Capitalism in Ceylon was based exclusively on plantations and economic activity subservient to that sector. In the period between the 1820's and the 1880's, when coffee was the main export crop, the form of organisation in the plantation sector was private proprietorship by British capitalists. In the 1880's in Europe, new forms of capitalist organisation emerged and the period was characterised by the growth of monopolies, the export of capital and the new wave of imperialism. In Ceylon from 1886 onwards, the impact of these changes was felt when private ownership in tea and rubber was replaced by company ownership. Imperialism as a system was typically only interested in extractive operations in respect of plantation produce, in accumulating the profits abroad and in re-investing in the plantation sector. There was a rapid expansion of such investment; the tea acreage which amounted to 387,000 acres in 1899 increased by 70% to 555,000 in 1934, and rubber plantations, which were first opened up in the early years of the twentieth century, accounted for 600,000 acres in 1934. The economy was thus a heavily lopsided one, dependent for nearly all its export earnings on three crops.

The corollary of the concentration of investment in the plantation sector was the neglect of the rest of the economy. Manufactured articles and consumer goods were imported, and the lack of any tariff restrictions benefitted British industrial products and also thwarted the development

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of local enterprise. The only goods manufactured in Ceylon in the thirties, conformed to the typical colonial pattern (tobacco, soap, candles, ice, soft drinks, etc.) and even much of this was British-owned. Whatever other industrial development that occurred was directly geared to economic activity in the plantations. This was largely in the public sector and consisted of workshops in the railways and public works departments; in the private sector there were engineering workshops which handled plantation machinery. An essential feature of this type of development was the virtual absence of a class of local industrialists and traders. The largest textile mill was owned by Indians and the only industries (in the 'thirties) owned by Ceylonese were matches, beedi, furniture, brushes and some minor industries associated with the processing of coconut products. The position was similar in the sphere of trade. The export-import trade was dominated by British and Indians, and even domestic trade was heavily foreign-owned. For example in 1944, 90% of the wholesalers, 60% of the medium dealers and 40% of the retailers were Indians. The economic basis of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie was plantation agriculture and mining (rubber, coconut, cinnamon, timber, graphite, and arrack renting) and income from small trade, rent, service contracts, employment in government service and the professions. The early beginnings of a nationalist movement arose when this bourgeoisie began to ask for concessions from the imperialists.[1]

While a capitalist form of production was introduced into Ceylon through plantations in the 1820's, the plantation workers recruited from South India were kept in conditions not far removed from serfdom. Independent activity and organisation among this group of semi-wage labour was thereby retarded. However, the growth of transport and urban workshops ancillary to the plantation economy led to the emergence of a nucleus of urban skilled and unskilled wage labour. Urban wage labour, divorced from the traditional means of production in the village, found itself in a new form of employer-worker relationship in the towns. Being 'free' agents, selling their labour on the market, a section of the urban working-class sought to improve its position through organization and joint action. During the fifty-year period between 1880 and 1930, the workers' agitation for trade union rights was linked with the movement for constitutional reforms led by the bourgeoisie.

The struggle of the bourgeoisie and the urban workers for democratic rights can be divided into several phases. The first phase between 1880 and 1920 was a period of religious revival and nationalism. The challenge to British imperialism arose in an indirect form with the Buddhist and Hindu

1. For the details on industry and trade see the *Times of Ceylon Green Book* 1933; The Review of Important Events Relating to... the British Empire, 1944-5, quoted in S. U. Kodikara, "Indians in Ceylon: Problems and Prospects," *Ceylon Studies Seminar* 68/69 Series, No. 7 (University of Ceylon). Also N. Ramachandran, *Foreign Plantation Investment in Ceylon* 1889-1958, Central Bank of Ceylon, 1963.

revival movements of the 1880's led by the Sinhalese and Tamil intelligentsia. This cultural self-assertion of the indigenous religions against the religion of the foreign rulers and their agents, the Christian missionaries, was a form of incipient nationalism. For, as Lenin has pointed out, "political protests in religious guise are common to all nations at a certain stage of their development." Significantly, it was a Buddhist Theosophist teacher, A. E. Buultjens, and other middle-class reformers associated with various protest movements, who started the first trade union in Ceylon in 1893 (the Ceylon Printers Union), after a strike of printers at Cave & Co. In the period up to 1920, there were numerous unorganised, spontaneous strikes and a few organised strikes of laundry-men (1896), carters (1906), railway workers (1912) and harbour and railway workers (1920), which reflected the growing consciousness among the working-class of the possibilities of joint action against what Marx called "the mass of misery, oppression, degradation and exploitation." These strikes were led by the unorthodox fringe of the Ceylonese bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie which included Buddhist revivalists, Theosophists, social reformers, temperance workers, and the more politically conscious nationalists who first gave the urban workers an element of trade union and class consciousness. These leaders were often paternalistic, advocating conciliation and moderation to the working-class, but nevertheless championing the workers' basic right to form trade unions. They were persons who were simultaneously involved in claiming their rights, which included the right of middle-class suffrage and political representation, racial equality and equal opportunity vis-a-vis British officialdom in Ceylon.

The 1920's form the second phase of the movement for democratic rights. This was a period of militant trade union struggle, beginning in 1923, when the Ceylon Labour Union under the leadership of A. E. Goonesinha, organized a general strike in Colombo of 20,000 workers. It was followed by a wave of successful strikes, in the harbour in 1927, among taxi drivers and industrial workers in 1928, and culminating in the violent tramway strike of 1929, during which police firing led to five deaths. The leadership of urban wage labour of the 'twenties came from the radical section of the Ceylon bourgeoisie, most notably from the staunch nationalist A. E. Goonesinha, who took the fight for democratic rights a stage further than the moderate reformers of the Ceylon National Congress, the political organisation of the bourgeoisie (formed in 1919). In a society where wage labour relationships existed alongside vestiges of feudalism, where there were class, caste, communal and religious divisions, and where the exploiting class was both foreign and local, the important political slogans of the period were "freedom", "equality," and "social reform." Goonesinha's Ceylon Labour Union (formed in 1922) and the Ceylon Labour Party (formed in 1928) called for political independence, universal suffrage, political rights irrespective of race,

religion or sex, the recognition of trade unions and the right to strike, and minimum wages, pensions and other social legislation for the working class.

The ideology of the 'advanced' elements of the bourgeoisie of the pre-1920 phase had been Gladstonian Liberalism tinged with Buddhism, Theosophy, and humanitarianism. The demands were essentially upper middle-class demands for moderate political reform, limited suffrage and equal rights. But during the 'twenties—a period of economic boom, when the Ceylonese bourgeoisie increased its economic power and urban wage labour expanded in size and acquired greater class consciousness—certain radical sections of the bourgeoisie and a section of the petty bourgeoisie came into prominence and were shrill in their agitation for political reforms and social changes. This was the 'Goonesinha era' with its ideology of Social Democracy.

The Ceylon Labour Union led by Goonesinha had no contact with the international Communist movement or even with the Indian Communist movement. Goonesinha had been inspired by Indian nationalists and by the British Labour Party; Communism held no appeal for him, though he had on occasion expressed admiration for "the heroic lion-like qualities" of Lenin. During the general strike of 1923, the Governor voiced fears about Communist influence in Ceylon, but the Inspector-General of Police reassured him that Communists were not organisers of the strike, and that European and Indian Communist publications sent to Goonesinha were confiscated at the post office. However, the fear of possible Communist influence was prevalent and the Buddhist leader, Anagarika Dharmapala, came under suspicion. His movements were closely watched and when he visited Europe and the U.S.A. in 1925, a report by the Ceylon Police stated "it may be possible that he is making this trip with the object of getting into touch with M. N. Roy, the notorious Indian Bolshevik and publisher of revolutionary papers in Berlin." The Department of State in Washington reported in December 1925 that Dharmapala was in touch in New York "with the same old crowd of trouble-makers who are left-overs from the original Irish revolutionary movement and are shouting loudly for whatever looks revolutionary at the present time."[2]

Neither the Labour Union nor the Ceylon Labour Party were at any stage influenced by Marxism. In fact, the Ceylon Labour Party was guided by the British Labour Party and revolutionary methods of action were expressly renounced by Goonesinha. He declared that the Ceylon Labour Party was a Social Democratic party which believed that "the freedom of the country must be achieved by evolution and not revolution"

2. For the article on Lenin in Goonesinha's paper see *Kamkaru Handa*, 13 September 1925, "Lenin Viraya." For the report from the Dept. of State, Washington, see Dept. of National Archives, File (Conf.) P (53), Vol. II, Report of 16 June 1925.

and that the Labour Union was "not a revolutionary or Communist organisation" but was formed to protect the worker whose interests had been neglected by the State.[3]

Class and Politics[4]

The economic and political background to the formation of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party was the catastrophic economic depression of 1929-1935 that engulfed Ceylon, the total collapse of the militant labour movement of the 1920's and the assumption of the shadow of political power by the Ceylon bourgeoisie after the implementation of the Donoughmore reforms in 1931.

Some idea of the extent of the economic depression can be gauged from the export figures of the period. From the peak year of 1926 when the value of exports was Rs. 503 million, the value fell to Rs. 170 million in 1932. There was a sharp fall in the world prices of tea, copra and graphite and a disastrous collapse of the rubber industry. Unemployment increased sharply on plantations, and there was drastic retrenchment in government departments and in the private sector. During the depression years, Goonesinha's Ceylon Labour Union was unable to sustain its earlier militant policies. There were major strike defeats—Lake House (1929), Times of Ceylon (1931), and Galle Face Hotel (1933), and a consequent cessation of trade union struggles.

An assessment of the role of the Ceylon bourgeoisie in relation to the imperialists and to the working class is necessary in order to analyse the politics of this period. The imperialists, by 1931, continued to be the dominant economic and political force, although certain concessions in the form of constitutional changes had been made to the local bourgeoisie. But the Ceylon bourgeoisie was essentially a land-owning group which had hardly ventured into other spheres of activity. The large trading interests were British and Indian and the few industries and engineering workshops that existed were foreign-owned or run by government departments. The absence locally of industrial or mercantile capitalists meant that there was no serious conflict in this sphere with British interests. The conflict on land questions (over the title to waste land) between the British administration and the local bourgeoisie had been resolved by 1930, more or less in favour of the latter. Apart from rubber plantations, where there was both foreign and local ownership, the economic fields of activity were strictly demarcated. The British planters were exclusively on the tea plantations, whereas the local bourgeoisie had their own "spheres of influence"—coconut, cinnamon, graphite and traditional agriculture.

3. *The Comrade*, 19 May 1929 and *CDN*, 17 September, 1928.

4. For a detailed account of the years 1880-1930, see Kumari Jayawardena, *The Rise of the Labour Movement in Ceylon*, Duke University Press, 1972.

By 1931, the Ceylon bourgeoisie had achieved its main demands for franchise and political representation. Without mass-based activity or violent struggles, the bourgeoisie had gradually attained political rights by the constitutional reforms of 1912, 1920 and 1923, culminating in the Donoughmore reforms. Under this constitution, for the first time general elections were held (in 1931) for 50 elected constituencies under universal suffrage. The Ceylon National Congress, which in the 'twenties had led the agitation for reforms, was almost defunct by the early 'thirties. As a class, the bourgeoisie had achieved its main purpose, that is, political concessions within the broad imperialist framework.

For the urban and plantation working class, the years around 1931 mark an important turning point. The class consciousness of the urban workers had been heightened by the militant trade union struggles of the 'twenties, and on the plantations, after over a hundred years of exploitation and oppression, trade union agitation flared up for the first time in 1930-1931. But the catastrophic economic depression of 1929-1935 effectively crushed both the urban and plantation movements and the leadership was not able to survive this disaster.

The situation was an unusual one—for almost simultaneously, in the early 'thirties, there was a collapse of the nationalist and the labour organisations which had been active in the political and economic struggles of the 'twenties. A warped plantation economy had prevented the rise of an industrial bourgeoisie; the lack of a strong bourgeoisie, in turn, stultified the development of a strong nationalist movement and gave rise to a warped type of politics. The leaders of the Ceylon National Congress turned to collaboration with the imperialists. They acquiesed in the Donoughmore reforms, enthusiastically participated in the 1931 elections and accepted Ministries in the new legislature. They did not launch a movement for full independence but were satisfied to work within the existing colonial structure. The leaders of the Ceylon Labour Union also abandoned the struggle; they drifted into racism against the workers of Indian origin and into class collaboration with the employers, and by 1933 they were actively helping the employers to break strikes. In the plantations, the leaders of the Ceylon Estate Workers Federation, after a brief period of union activity in 1931, were forced by the depression into rear-guard activity and petition writing for individual workers. In this situation, the radical bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie were confronted with a difficult task—that of forming a single political party which could give leadership to both the anti-imperialist struggle and the working class movement.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) which was formed in 1935, assumed this dual role. In the absence of a nationalist movement led by a strong bourgeoisie (as existed in India), it had to take over the nationalist struggle. In the absence of a party or labour movement to fight

capitalism in the urban areas and the plantations, and to fight the vestiges of feudalism in the countryside, it had to also assume a socialist role. The new party thus took over the task of leading the political and trade union struggles for political reforms and democratic rights.

The International Situation

In discussing the events leading to the formation of the L.S.S.P. some comment on the contemporary international situation in relation to revolutionary movements is necessary. In the late 'twenties and early 'thirties, Left forces in the world had suffered several setbacks including the defeat of the General Strike in Britain in 1926, the consolidation of Mussolini's Fascist rule in Italy, the defeat of the Communists in China in 1927, and the rise to power of Hitler in 1933. Meanwhile, the emergence of a Left opposition in the Soviet Union, which resulted in the expulsion from the country of Leon Trotsky in 1929, reflected the internal problems of the Communist movement. This was also a period when the Communist International had to face several important political and tactical issues concerning the threat of Fascism, the attitude to Social Democrats and the policy to be adopted towards the national bourgeoisie in colonial countries.

The eruption of strike activity in Ceylon after 1927 and the increase of Communist influence in Indian trade unions led to unfounded fears being expressed about Communism in Ceylon. In 1928, an influential Ceylonese employer (H. L. de Mel) sent a memorandum to the government complaining of the intimidation of workers by the Ceylon Labour Union and advising the government that "the immediate and close attention of the Inspector-General of Police should be secured at once... to end this Bolshevik rule over the proletariat." Another scare was raised in 1929 at the time of the violent tramway strike, when the British *Times* described the labour troubles in Ceylon as being due to the influence of Moscow; this led to protests in Ceylon and one newspaper retorted that the Conservative Party, if it was interested in Ceylon, should study the "lack of educational facilities for the masses in Ceylon rather than cry Moscow."[5]

Between 1927 and 1935, several important changes occurred in the policy of the Communist International. In 1927, the Communists had formed the League Against Imperialism to include "all political organizations, parties, trade unions and persons...fighting against capitalist imperialist domination." The League declared that its task was to mobilise, "in a world-wide resistance to imperialist offensive, all the revolutio-

5. For de Mel's memorandum (28 May 1928), see Dept. of National Archives, File CF 492/1928; see *CDN*, 8 Feb. 1929 for the quotation from the *Times* (of Britain); and for the details of the tramway strike and for the quotation in the text see the *Ceylon Independent*, January-February 1929.

nary forces fighting for *freedom and democracy* in the oppressed colonial countries." The Executive Council of the League included many non-Communist nationalists like Nehru, Mohamed Hatta (Indonesia) and Lamine Senghor (French West Africa). By 1931, however, the attitude of the League towards these nationalists had changed, and warnings were issued against "illusions spread by these nationalist reformists concerning the possibility of winning national independence without a revolutionary struggle." During this period Nehru, Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose were denounced as traitors and agents of Imperialism. But in 1935, the 7th Congress of the Communist International faced with the "towering menace of Fascism to the working-class," changed its line to that of a 'People's Front Against Fascism.' Communists were urged to act jointly with Social Democrats in the political field and with existing trade unions in industrial matters.[6]

The Ceylonese Socialist Students

Before the First World War, Ceylonese students who went to Universities in Britain were drawn from the families of large landowners and those in the liberal professions. With the boom in all agricultural products and plantation crops in the 'twenties (especially coconut and rubber) a section of the newly prosperous rural bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie was able to afford a foreign university education for their children. Whereas the earlier progression of rich students had been from a few select Christian schools in Colombo to Oxford and Cambridge, the new type of student often went from provincial or Buddhist Theosophist schools to the cheaper and less fashionable London University.

In the twentieth century, the Ceylon Students Association in London had always been an important centre of political discussion among young Ceylonese. By the 1920's, the Association was dominated by a group of Socialist students, who while active in the broad student organization, used to also meet separately to discuss questions of Socialism and the possibility of forming a Socialist Party in Ceylon. The group included Philip Gunawardena, Leslie Goonewardena, Colvin R. de Silva,

6. Resolutions of the General Council (December 1927) and the Executive Committee (1931) of the League Against Imperialism. The resolution of the 1935 Congress of the Comintern declared that Communist parties had to "reach agreements with the organisations of the toilers of various political trends for joint action on a factory, local, district, national and international scale." *Resolutions of the 7th World Congress of the Comintern* (pamphlet) 1935.

The importance of joint trade union activity was stressed by George Dimitrov when he said—

"We must base our tactics not on the behaviour of individual leaders of the Amsterdam unions no matter what difficulties their behaviour may cause in the class struggle, but on the question of *where the masses are to be found... and make the question of struggle for trade union unity the central issue.*" George Dimitrov. *The Working Classes Against Fascism*, p. 50. Emphasis added.

N. M. Perera and Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe.[7] Except for Leslie Goonewardena, none of them belonged to the Christianised elite, but came from Buddhist, Sinhalese speaking families. They were educated in Buddhist Theosophist or government schools and had been politically influenced by Anagarika Dharmapala's Buddhist nationalist crusade, and had reacted against the repression that followed the riots of 1915.

The two important political influences on this group of Socialist students were the Indian nationalist movement and Marxism. The late 'twenties was a period when Indian nationalism was going through a militant phase; the Simon Commission on constitutional reforms had been boycotted by the Indian National Congress, and within the Congress the Communist and left-wing factions were influential. In London, the Indian students were active in nationalist agitation conducted mainly through their student organization, the London Majlis. Some members of the Ceylon Students Association (notably S. A. Wickremasinghe) worked in close co-operation with both the Majlis and the India League in London whose leading members were Krishna Menon, Fenner Brockway and the Rev. Sorenson. S. A. Wickremasinghe on his way back from Britain in 1928 spent two months in India, where he attended the sessions of the Indian Trade Union Congress. He re-visited India frequently. He was in Benares when the news arrived of Gandhi's arrest during the Salt March in 1931 and he rendered medical aid to the injured after the police fired on those protesting against Gandhi's arrest. He also visited

7. *Philip Gunawardena* (1900-1972) was the son of Boralugoda Ralahamy, a landowner who had been sentenced to death and reprieved during the 1915 Riots. After this episode Gunawardena was taken from a Christian school, Prince of Wales College, Moratuwa and sent to Ananda College. The Principal at the time was a Theosophist, Fritz Kunz, of Wisconsin University, who was sympathetic to Indian nationalism. Gunawardena also joined Wisconsin University where there were several Marxist teachers, including Scott Nearing and John Commons. (He died in March 1972).

Leslie Goonewardena (born in 1909), whose father was a doctor in Panadura, came from a landowning Westernised family. He went to St. Thomas' College, Colombo, and to a public school in Wales. He did the B.Sc. (Economics) degree at the London School of Economics and qualified as a barrister. (He is today the Minister of Transport & Communications).

N. M. Perera (born in 1905): His father was a rent collector in Colombo who also had a cloth shop. Perera was educated at Ananda College. He did a Ph.D. on the Weimar Republic at the London School of Economics and later obtained a D.Sc. for a thesis on Parliamentary Procedure. (Today he is the Minister of Finance).

Colvin R. de Silva (born in 1907): His father was a Registered Medical Practitioner (Apothecary) who owned land. He was educated first at St. John's, Panadura, and later at Royal College. He did a degree and Ph.D. at London University and was called to the Bar. His thesis was on British rule in Ceylon up to 1833. In 1927, de Silva was the Secretary of the Ceylon Students Association. He visited the Soviet Union in 1931 (Today he is the Minister of Plantations).

S. A. Wickremasinghe (born in 1901) was from a landowning family in South Ceylon. He was educated at Mahinda College (Galle) where the Principal was the Theosophist, F. L. Woodward, and the Vice-Principal, F. Gordon Pearce, was a member of the British Independent Labour Party. During the 1915 riots, Wickremasinghe, who was a school boy, was involved in a skirmish with a British police officer. Wickremasinghe qualified as a doctor in Ceylon and went to Britain in 1926. In London he was President of the Ceylon Student Association in 1927. (Today he is the General Secretary of the Communist Party).

Gandhi in jail and spent some time at Santiniketan where he met Tagore in 1933.

Among both Indian and Ceylonese students in England during this period, there was great disillusionment with the British Labour Party, which was regarded as imperialist in colonial policy and reformist in home affairs. Hence, the revolutionary slogans of the Communist Party and the left-wing of the Labour Party seemed to have greater relevance and appeal to many of the students from colonial countries. In addition, the fact that two of the leading members of the British Communist Party (R. Palme Dutt and S. Saklatvala) were Indians, led to close contact between the Communist Party and the Indian and Ceylonese students. Philip Gunawardena and Leslie Goonewardena belonged to the Indian Communist student group in London. While in America, Berlin and Paris, Philip Gunawardena worked with groups of Indian revolutionaries.

In 1928, the conference of the Communist-sponsored League Against Imperialism, which was held in London, attracted the attention of the colonial students. The policy of the League was one of condemnation of the Socialist Second International and the British Labour Party, which was accused of having "made common cause with the British Imperialists" by participating in the Simon Commission.[8] Philip Gunawardena was on the executive council of the League from 1929-1931.

Several of the Ceylonese students acquired a theoretical knowledge of Marxism through contact with Marxist intellectuals and with Socialist teachers at British and American universities, and practical experience was obtained through membership in various Communist organizations, especially the British Communist Party. The Left Opposition views within the Communist movement influenced Philip Gunawardena who, on his way back to Ceylon, contacted Trotskyist groups in France and Spain.

It is important to note to what extent the views of this group of Socialist Ceylonese students differed from the opinions of other political associations in Ceylon. This can be gauged from the stand they took on two vital issues, the question of political reforms and the role of the trade union movement. At a time when the Donoughmore reforms and A. E. Goonesinha's Labour Party were supported by the British Labour Party, the Socialist student group in London made known their opposition to the reforms and to the politics and trade union policy of Goonesinha.

Attitude to Reforms

One important area of disagreement concerned the role of the bourgeoisie in Ceylon. After the publication of the recommendations of the Donoughmore Commission in 1928, the Ceylonese students in London

8. Resolution of the General Council of the League against Imperialism, 1927.

held a series of weekly discussions at which Krishna Menon, S. Saklatvala and D. B. Jayatilaka were the main speakers. A critical examination of the proposed reforms was made, and reports of these discussion were published as a pamphlet in 1928 by S. A. Wickremasinghe and Krishna Menon. In this pamphlet the students disagreed with the attitude adopted by the British Labour Party and A. E. Goonesinha to the Ceylonese bourgeoisie. The British Labour Party regarded the Ceylon National Congress as a set of oligarchs, while Goonesinha's objections to the Ceylonese leaders were so strong that he said he was against more responsible government unless the franchise was broadened. But the Ceylonese students in London adopted the prevalent Communist line that the 'national bourgeoisie' should be supported in the fight against foreign rule. They held that the indigenous oligarchy was preferable to a foreign one because the former "had the knowledge of the land and people, [were] of the same stock and tradition, and formed a wider oligarchy with the inherent possibility of ceasing to be one."

On the question of universal suffrage the student group argued that, although it was desirable, its immediate significance was not to be overestimated because of the danger of a "large number of votes being at the mercy of those who have the economic power to manipulate them." The Donoughmore Commissioners were accused of "treating the problem in the old way, of looking at political and evading economic issues," and of neglecting to report on labour conditions in Ceylon, which "would have at least served to draw the attention of the British parliament, and the Government of Ceylon and the I.L.O." to the exploitation of labour in Ceylon. They alleged that this was deliberately omitted as the findings would have discredited the British administration and planter interests; in this connection, the Labour M.P., Dr. Drummond Shiels, who was a member of the Donoughmore Commission, was blamed for shirking a duty which "he owed to the labour world as a whole."[9]

Attitude to A. E. Goonesinha

The Ceylon student group in London also opposed the policies and leadership of A. E. Goonesinha in the Ceylon Labour Union and the Ceylon Labour Party. It was essential for the students to take a stand on Goonesinha's position, because from 1922 until the years of the depression, the Ceylon Labour Union had led the trade union struggles of the Colombo workers, and the Ceylon Labour Party had become the most radical force on the political scene. The young generation of nationalist Ceylonese supported A. E. Goonesinha in the fight for swaraj, universal suffrage, trade union rights, better wages and better working conditions. But dissatisfaction with the leadership of the labour movement grew, especially after the Labour Union signed a collective agreement with the

9. *Study of the Report on the Constitution*, Ceylon Students Association, London, 1928.

employers in 1929 under which lightning strikes were renounced in return for recognition of the Union.

The first theoretical Marxist analysis of the role of Goonesinha and the labour movement of the 'twenties was made by Philip Gunawardena in an article, entitled "Whither Ceylon," written in 1931. Goonesinha was given credit for the militant battles he had fought on behalf of the workers and was called "a man of tremendous initiative and daring." According to Philip Gunawardena, the crucial strike, which marked the culmination of a period of offensive action by the workers, was the tramway strike and riot of 1929 during which the workers set fire to the Maradana Police Station:

> The workers rose to an extraordinary pitch of revolutionary energy, enthusiam and sacrifice... to defend their class interests and smash the symbol of capitalist authority... [They] displayed rare initiative and ability to cope with a critical situation when parliamentarians were wasting their time in hair splitting arguments over constitutional authority... The weakened nationalists shivered in their shoes and knelt at the altar of Imperalism begging it to save them from their class enemies... their class fear was more potent than their fear of foreign conquerors.

Gunawardena claimed that the strike weapon was "the manifestation of the class struggle at a fairly acute stage" and that during the tramway strike the workers, "who [were] not interested in the law and order of a capitalist society," were able to "put out of commission the authority of the decadent capitalist society." Although the workers had neither preparation nor correct leadership, they were able to challenge "the armed forces of the mightiest Empire the world has ever seen." In contrast to the militancy of the workers, Goonesinha was accused of failing to give the required revolutionary leadership during the strike and of displaying "a lamentable confusion." Goonesinha's praise of the British police officials and the cheers that he asked the workers to give the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce after the settlement of the strike, were referred to as "tactical blunders" of the first magnitude.[10]

Attack on the British Labour Party

In the late 'twenties, the Communists and the Left-wing of the Labour Party in Britain were highly critical not only of the political leadership of the British Labour Party but also of the policy of the British trade union movement and especially of the Mond-Turner negotiations. These talks between Sir Alfred Mond, the Chairman of the large combine of I.C.I. (Imperial Chemical Industries) and Ben Turner, the Chairman of the

10. Philip Gunawardena, "Whither Ceylon," *The Searchlight*, 9 Nov. 1931.

British Trades Union Congress, were the first important attempt to obtain industrial peace through collaboration between employers and labour.

Influenced by the Communist line on these two questions, the Ceylonese student group criticised the close association between the British Labour Party and A. E. Goonesinha in both political and trade union matters. Labour personalities such as Ramsay MacDonald, Drummond Shiels and George Lansbury were said to have introduced Goonesinha "to the wonders of Fabian mysticism," and in the trade union sphere, British union officials were said to have explained the nature of "Mondism" to Goonesinha, who after his visit to England in 1928, returned to Ceylon "a devout apostle of industrial peace and a class collaborator." The signing of the collective agreement in Ceylon in 1929 was also attributed to this influence. Philip Gunawardena alleged that soon after Goonesinha returned from England, the Chairman of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce, S. P. Hayley, "a high priest of industrial peace, hurriedly formed the Employers Federation to collaborate with the Trade Unions...Hayley addressed the business community in the tones of a Hebrew prophet and... an Agreement was signed to prevent lightning strikes." Gunawardena also claimed that Goonesinha's conciliatory attitude towards the Employers' Federation was proof that very few leaders of the working class could escape the temptations of capitalist society. Goonesinha, he said, having risen to power "on the shoulders of the workers, [was] looking round for an official position in the framework of Imperialism, and the Labour Government of England makes the temptations doubly attractive."[11]

In order to counteract the influence of the British Labour Party, the Ceylon unions were urged to maintain contacts abroad only with "genuine working-class organizations" and with the "revolutionary trade union movement" in India; warnings were presented against the I.L.O., the Socialist Second International and trade union bureaucrats "of the English and American type."

The views of the Ceylonese Socialist students in London presented a new departure in ideology for the Ceylon political and labour movement. While these students remained abroad, their agitational activities were confined to student organizations and foreign nationalist or Communist groups. The impact of these ideas was felt in Ceylon in the early 'thirties, when all the active members of the student group returned home. On their return they emphasized the need for a new political party; this was formed in 1935 but until then the young Socialists joined the radical Youth League movement which had already taken root in the country.

11. *Ibid.*

The Youth League Movement in Ceylon

Among the nationalist youth who had studied in Ceylon during the 'twenties, there was great dissatisfaction with the existing political organisations, and the need for a new approach to political, social and economic issues was keenly felt. The Ceylon National Congress was regarded as a conservative organisation, dominated by the "old guard" leaders, who were against mass political action or any extension of the franchise. Some of the radicals—K. Natesa Aiyar, George Caldera, James T. Rutnam, Susan de Silva and Valentine Perera—had joined Goonesinha's Labour Party hoping that this body would provide a vigorous and progressive alternative to the Congress, but most of them dropped out after conflicts with Goonesinha.

Attempts were made in the 'twenties to form a radical political party when S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike returned from Oxford. His views on economics and politics and his defiance of the older politicians, made him for a time the hope of the young Ceylonese. In 1926, the Progressive Nationalist Party, formed with Bandaranaike as its President, attracted many young nationalists and students. The aim of the party was full self-government for Ceylon and the fostering of a "spirit of nationalism" in order to widen the scope of political agitation which "had hitherto been the monopoly of a few."[12] This attempt to unite the existing radical forces failed and Bandaranaike continued his political career in the Ceylon National Congress. The existing dissatisfaction with Goonesinha's one-man leadership of the trade union movement resulted in efforts to break his control over organized labour and, in 1927, Bandaranaike contested and defeated Goonesinha at a Colombo Municipal Council election.

There was a heightened interest in politics after the arrival of the Donoughmore Commissioners in 1927, when issues such as the degree of self-government for Ceylon and the extension of the franchise were hotly debated. The politically conscious youth, who had no faith in the Ceylon National Congress or the Ceylon Labour Party, began to group themselves into Youth Leagues in various parts of the country in order to protest against the new constitution. The first youth League (led by Handy Perinpanayagam and C. Balasingham) was formed in Jaffna and active Youth Leagues sprang up in Colombo. In 1931, the Youth Leagues came together to form a Youth Congress which had Aelian Pereira, a lawyer, as its president and Valentine Perera and George Caldera (also lawyers) as secretaries.

Anti-Imperialism

The political outlook of the Youth Leagues can be divided into two phases: the purely nationalist, anti-imperialist phase when the Leagues

12. *Ceylon Independent*, 6 September 1926.

concentrated on agitating for political independence, and the second phase, when the Socialist students who returned to Ceylon during the depression years, gave the Youth Leagues a Socialist orientation and directed them to an interest in economic issues.

An important source of inspiration of the Youth League movement came from the militant section of the Indian National movement. In India, by the late 1920's, the Socialists had formed a group within the Indian National Congress, and in 1931, two Left-wing members of Congress, Jawaharlal Nehru and Kamaladevi Chattopadyaya, who were visiting Ceylon, addressed a meeting of the Youth Congress.

In the earlier phase, the activities of the Youth Leagues were dominated by political questions connected with the Donoughmore Constitution. In May 1931, a resolution was moved by Stanley de Zoysa that the youth of Ceylon had completely lost faith in British rule which was "fraught with incalculable detriment to the social, economic, political and cultural life of the people" and that an intensive campaign should be launched for the immediate attainment of swaraj. At the Youth Congress in December 1931, Valentine Perera called for "downright unadulterated independence" and stated that no halfway measures would be acceptable. The Youth Leagues denounced the Donoughmore Constitution on various occasions as "a setback in the political history of Ceylon" and "a flagrant invasion of our cherished rights.... calculated to wound our national self-respect."[13]

The Youth Leagues also launched several boycott campaigns. Influenced by the methods of the Indian National movement, some Youth Leagues called for a boycott of the general elections held in June 1931 as a protest against the new constitution. On election day, Youth League members demonstrated with placards near polling stations, urging people not to vote. The boycott was only successful in Jaffna, mainly because the Tamil population had their own special grievances against the constitution. There was also a campaign by the Youth Leagues to boycott foreign goods, especially rice, liquor, cloth and tobacco, and Ceylonese were urged to join the swadeshi movement launched by the Youth Leagues to encourage local products. The Colombo South Youth League opened a swadeshi co-operative store which only sold local products. Terence de Zylva, one of the most active members of the Youth movement, declared that as Ceylon was "held in bondage by military force and repression," the only weapon the Ceylonese could use was the boycott of foreign goods and the fostering of national industries. Another boycott sponsored by the Youth Leagues was that against the King's birthday celebrations, on the ground that such occasions fostered a "lamentable form of slave mentality" and were bound to be regarded as a "willing acquiesence to be governed and controlled by Great Britain."[14]

13. *The Morning Leader*, 18 May and 29 Dec. 1931.
14. *The Searchlight*, 13 February 1932; and *The Morning Leader*, 26 May 1931.

The Youth Leagues were also critical of the country's education system, which Terence De Zylva (the founder of Kolonnawa Vidyalaya) claimed was "in the hands of Empire builders who had used it as a political weapon." At the Youth Congress sessions in 1931, C. C. Sabaratnam proposed and de Zylva seconded a resolution that the existing system of education was injurious to Ceylon's "political, cultural and economic well-being" and urged that a national system of education in swabasha be implemented.[15]

It can thus be seen how, in the absence of a broad nationalist movement led by the bourgeoisie, Youth League radicals stood in the forefront of the nationalist movement during this period.

Economic Issues and Socialism

In addressing the Youth Congress in 1931, Nehru had emphasised the inadequacy of nationalism alone without an understanding of the working of capitalism. At that time the left-wing in the Indian National Congress believed that political independence would be of little value without radical social changes; Nehru advised the Youth League members to consider how national freedom would affect the masses in the country and urged them to try and understand the nature of imperialism and capitalism. "How will you free the men, women and children of Ceylon? Freedom is worth striving for, but you must see how it affects the bottom dog in your country." At the same meeting, Kamaladevi Chattopadyaya spoke of Gandhi's campaign of civil disobedience in 1930, and said that it was "not only imperialist violence that Gandhi was up against, but also the violence of the capitalists who exploited the poor."[16]

As a result of the trade depression and the prevailing high rates of unemployment, economic problems were frequently highlighted by the Youth League movement. For example in January 1932, Terrence de Zylva declared that the aim of Ceylon youth should include "freedom from .... the vulgar pride of wealth .... and monopoly of the necessaries of life by self-seeking capitalists," and he called upon the youth to liberate the country" from alien domination and economic exploitation."[17] In May 1932, the monthly journal *Young Ceylon*, published by the Youth League movement, declared that its aims were complete independence, economic stability and national solvency. In 1932, the Colombo South Youth League issued a pamphlet entitled *The Present Economic Crisis* which aimed at showing that political and economic freedom were "inextricably bound up with each other." This pamphlet referred to British economic interests in the country as "a constant drain of the country's wealth" and it

15. *The Morning Leader*, 24 December 1931.
16. *The Morning Leader*, 18 May 1931.
17. "Our Duty" by Terence de Zylva, *The Searchlight*, 27 January 1932.

condemned the system of *Imperial Preference* as "disastrous to the economic stability of the island."[18] The Youth Leagues called for a more equitable distribution of wealth, to be obtained through "the re-organization of tariffs, taxation and finance." It is significant that, in 1932, Socialism was not one of the slogans that was openly used, and the equal distribution of wealth was advocated through financial reform and not by means of a revolutionary change in the social order. But it must be noted that a few of the Youth League members in Ceylon (notably Terence de Zylva and Susan de Silva) had already shown interest in Socialist ideas.

However, by the latter half of 1932 and in 1933, there were significant changes in the politics of the Youth Leagues, when the Socialist students, who had studied abroad, returned to Ceylon and became leaders of the Youth League movement. For the first time in Ceylon, Communism and the experiences of the U.S.S.R. received favourable comment. In September 1932, Colvin R. de Silva, who had joined the Colombo South Youth League, wrote an article in *Young Ceylon* proclaiming Communism as the new ideology to be followed. In the same issue Robin Rutnam, a Youth League member who had studied in Canada, argued that the need for economic planning was "the most significant lesson the outside world [was] learning from the great social experiment in Russia," and he forecast that the youth of Ceylon had a great opportunity to create "a new social order."[19] The pages of the *Young Ceylon*, from the latter half of 1932 onwards, contained several references to Marx and Lenin. For example, the reviewer of a book by Lenin wrote: "No speeches delivered in recent times can have a greater interest than the speeches of the greatest moral force in the proletarian revolution, Lenin;" and a review of "Socialism and War" stated that the book provided "a glimpse into the alert, resourceful and clear mind of Lenin."[20]

In the years preceding the formation of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, the Youth League movement made its influence felt principally in four ways: first, the Youth Leagues, under new Socialist leadership, made the anti-Poppy Day campaign a platform for anti-imperialist propaganda against the British; second, during the malaria epidemic of 1934-35, the Socialists played an active part in the relief of distress; third, in 1933, they led a strike at a textile mill in Colombo and gained valuable experience in trade union agitation; and fourth, from 1931 to 1936, through their first representative in the State Council, the young Socialists entered the field of parliamentary politics.

18. Quoted in *Young Ceylon*, June 1932.
19. *Young Ceylon*, September 1932, "The Need for a Planned National Life" by Robin Rutnam.
20. *Young Ceylon*, September & October 1932.

The Suriya Mal Movement

One of the issues that brought the Youth Leagues to the forefront of nationalist political activity was the anti-Poppy Day campaign, which had its beginnings among a group of radical students in 1926, was carried on by the Ceylon Ex-Servicemen's Association and the Youth Leagues in 1931, and was given a distinct and militant anti-British appeal when the Colombo Central Youth League took over the movement in 1933.

Armistice day (Poppy Day) on November 11th (commemorating the end of the first World War) used to be observed in the 'twenties with a great deal of fervour by government officials and the British residents in Ceylon. On that day, funds were collected for ex-servicemen by the sale of poppies and there was a reaffirming of faith in the Empire by means of military parades, church services and banquets held with great pomp and ceremony. The jingoistic annual Poppy Day displays caused resentment among some of the young Ceylonese nationalists who were highly critical of Ceylon's contribution to the Poppy Fund which was one of the largest in the Empire.

In 1926, James Rutnam, complained in a letter to the press that though Ceylon was a poor country, vast sums of money, disproportionate to her revenue, were being sent out of the country in the form of Poppy Day collections and that only an insignificant portion of that money was employed for aid to Ceylonese ex-servicemen. A group of young Ceylonese (Harry Gunawardena, D. N. W. de Silva, Valentine Perera, C. Ponnambalam and James Rutnam) who called themselves "The Cosmopolitan Crew," organized a public meeting and demonstration to protest against Poppy Day in 1926. These young men were nationalists, some of whom had been associated with A. E. Goonesinha's labour activities, and were to become active members of the Youth Leagues.

In 1931, a more positive step against the Poppy Day collection was taken when the Ceylon Ex-Servicemen's Association whose president, Aelian Pereira, was also the president of the Youth Congress and an ex-serviceman himself, launched a rival fund called after a local flower, 'Suriya Mal', in order to collect money for Ceylonese ex-soldiers and for local charities. Pereira said that there were many Ceylonese servicemen who were disabled, destitute and in urgent need of help; "there is an idea" he wrote, "that it is dirty and mean to sell the *suriya* flower on armistice day;" but he explained that this particular day was chosen as it had special significance to all servicemen.[21] The Youth Leagues took up the Suriya Mal campaign with great enthusiasm and transformed the occasion into a demonstration of anti-British feeling.

21. *Times of Ceylon*, 10 November 1932.

The sale of the rival flower on Poppy Day, 1931, created a great interest in Colombo and other towns. There were brisk sales, especially in the working-class areas of Colombo where there were more *suriya* flowers than poppies, and it was reported that pedestrians in Colombo "showed preference for the Suriya Mal, but most cars had poppies." The leading Christian schools of Colombo refused to let the *suriya mal* sellers enter their premises, and some British business firms warned their employees against wearing a *suriya* flower to work.[22]

The Ceylon Ex-Servicemen's Association which had sponsored the Suriya Mal campaign was alarmed by the political character of the campaign and by the opposition that it aroused, and in 1932, the Association decided to discontinue the movement. This was the opportunity for the Socialists, and in 1933, the Colombo Central Youth League took over the Suriya Mal campaign and elected a Committee for this purpose whose president was Doreen Wickremasinghe, the principal of Ananda Balika Vidyalaya.[23] This committee included many of the Socialists who had returned to Ceylon from abroad and also the most radical members of the Youth Leagues. The movement also attracted many other nationalists including S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who was in charge of the Suriya Mal funds, and Wilmot Perera, at whose school (Sri Palee in Horana) the Suriya Mal annual meetings were held. It should also be mentioned that several young persons were drawn into political activity through participation in the Suriya Mal movement. The money collected was used for the education of a child of a "depressed" community and for the publication of literature. The Ananda Balika principal's house became the headquarters of the movement and each year hundreds of yellow *suriya* flowers were made and sold by the school's enthusiastic staff, among them Helen de Alwis, Eva de Mel, Violet Gamage, Lilian Bandaranaike and Winifred Silva.

The Suriya Mal movement, which had originated as a campaign for ex-servicemen, dropped any reference to disabled Ceylonese soldiers and openly took on a political and anti-British character. This led to a great deal of anger and resentment on the part of the authorities and the British residents in Ceylon. The new *suriya mal* organisers were accused of a "lack of decent sensibility," and the campaign was called a "crude political move....utterly in bad taste."[24]

22. *The Ceylon Independent*, 11 November 1931, and *The Morning Leader*, 10 November 1931.

23. Doreen Wickremasinghe, née Young, was born in Cheshire and came from a family which had connections with the British Labour Party. She was a student at the London School of Economics from 1926 to 1929, and was the secretary of the Students Union. On graduating she worked as Krishna Menon's Secretary at the India League. In 1930 she came to Ceylon and taught in a Buddhist school.

24. Editorial in *Ceylon Independent*, 11 November 1933.

Several new political slogans were introduced into the Suriya Mal campaign by the Youth Leagues. In 1933, Leslie Goonewardena wrote, "We have yet to be shown that Britain fought for us during the war or that she has disinterestedly done anything for us in peace....the purchase of the Poppy in Ceylon is only too often an expression of blind admiration for the mighty British Empire." Terence de Zylva declared that the movement was "definitely anti-war" and that they should prevent money going out of the country "to help the British Empire to wage wars for the purpose of partitioning the world." For the first time the concept of socialism was used in the campaign when de Zylva ended an article on "Suriya or Poppy" which he wrote in 1932 with an appeal to "Unite in this battle to establish a Socialist. Democratic Ceylon."[25]

Trade Union Activity

In the years before the founding of the L.S.S.P., the Youth Leaguers gained experience of trade union agitation by taking over the leadership of a strike at the Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills in 1933. This was a turning point in the working-class history of Ceylon because the Labour Union led by A. E. Goonesinha, which had abandoned its radical policy after the onset of the depression, was effectively challenged in the trade union field by the militant elements of the Youth Leagues.

The Indian-owned Wellawatte Spinning and Weaving Mills, established in 1890, was the largest textile mill in Ceylon, employing 1,400 skilled and semi-skilled workers. In 1923, 1926 and 1929, there had been strikes at the mills under Goonesinha's leadership. In February, 1933, as a result of the economic depression and the increased competition of Japanese textiles in the market, the management announced a reduction in wages. This led to a strike of the entire labour force, instigated, according to the management, by "veteran ringleaders" among the workers. The strikers sent a petition to the Minister of Labour and appealed to Goonesinha to intervene on their behalf. To the surprise of the workers, Goonesinha advised them to return to work on the grounds that striking without giving the required notice was a breach of the collective agreement between the union and the Employers Federation, and also because the Labour Union membership of the majority of the strikers had lapsed.

The strikers then appealed for support to a lawyer, H. Sri Nissanka (a Youth League member) who lived opposite the Mills; he advised them to put their case to Colvin R. de Silva, who had recently returned from Britain. De Silva and other members of the Colombo South League took up the question, and on February 23rd, at a mass meeting of the workers, the Wellawatte Workers' Union was formed with de Silva as president and

25. See *Young Ceylon*, October 1933 for Leslie Goonewardena's article; and *The Searchlight*, 18 October 1933 for the article by Terence de Zylva.

two active Youth League members, Vernon Gunasekera and J. W. Senanayake, as secretaries. Philip Gunawardena, N. M. Perera, S. A. Wickremasinghe, Robert Gunawardena, Susan de Silva and several militant workers, including Appuhamy, Kuttan and Ramiah, helped in organizing the strikers, spoke at mass meetings, collected funds and distributed relief.

During the strike, which lasted two months, A. E. Goonesinha's aim was to prevent recognition of the new union by either employers or government. The manager of the mills refused to open negotiations with the newly formed Wellawatte Workers' Union, and said that he was prepared to accept only Goonesinha as the accredited representative of the workers. Goonesinha denounced the Youth League as a political organization which was misleading the workers for the "sinister purpose" of disrupting organized labour. In tolerating the "scandalous interference" of the Youth League in the strike, Goonesinha said that the Controller of Labour was "encouraging anarchism." The new union leaders, according to Goonesinha, had "imbibed fantastic ideas from Russia and America" and were seeking to introduce "aggressive methods into the life of the labourers in Ceylon."[26]

The strike at the Mills was aggravated by the introduction of communal issues into the dispute. Because of the composition of the workers at these mills—around two/third's Malayali and one/third Sinhalese—Goonesinha was able to stir up anti-Malayali feeling at a time when communal tensions were strong in Colombo due to the extensive unemployment during the depression. The secretary of the new union condemned "the mischievous, irresponsible activities of Mr. Goonesinha who through a campaign of vilification, insult and abuse of a highly inflammatory character, is striving to raise interracial animosity in this dispute." The attempt by Goonesinha to introduce Sinhalese blacklegs into the mills increased the tension. Harbour workers were sent in lorries to the mills by Goonesinha, who claimed that the purpose was to afford protection to the strikers who were willing to go back to work. The police stated that Goonesinha, "by deliberately importing rowdies," had provoked clashes between Malayalis and Sinhalese, and had brought about a "most serious state of affairs."[27]

In view of the increase of communal tension, the Minister of Labour informed the Governor that "the disturbances which [had] already arisen and the risks of racial clashes [were] too substantial to be set aside."[28] The government therefore decided to intervene and appointed a commission for the settlement of the dispute under the Industrial Disputes Ordinance of 1931.

26. Ceylon Labour Department, File T. 15, letter of 15 March 1933; and *CDN*, 2 May 1933, and 22 March 1933, Letter to the Editor.
27. Ceylon Labour Department, File T. 6, Police Report, 21 March 1933.
28. Ceylon Labour Department, File T. 15, Letter of 23 March 1933.

This was the first occasion when the provisions of the Ordinance were used in the conciliation of a trade dispute. The commission in its report reprimanded the workers for striking without first trying to negotiate with the management, and Goonesinha's efforts to persuade the men to return to work were described as reasonable. The commission agreed that the management of the Wellawatte Mills needed financial relief and that "wages should make a contribution of some substance towards this relief," but they recommended a maximum reduction of wages by 12%, which would be covered by the fall in the cost of living during the depression. The demand for a reduction in the hours of work from 60 to 54 hours a week was turned down as impracticable, as mills in India were also working a 60 hour week. The commission also stated that the financial difficulties of the time made it impossible for them to recommend the other improved amenities that the workers demanded.[29]

The report was welcomed by Goonesinha and a meeting of the Ceylon Labour Union was organised to celebrate the occasion, at which Goonesinha gave an account of all the concessions he had obtained for the workers in the past years. In contrast, Colvin R. de Silva, the president of the Wellawatte Workers' Union, said that, unlike Goonesinha, the workers did not greet the report with a "hallelujah chorus" as it was neither "fair, just, nor reasonable." On the question of wages he said, "We cannot accept the principle that wages should invariably vary with the cost of living. This is based on the utterly unwarrantable assumption that the prevailing wage rates are just."[30]

The government was concerned at the appearance of a new militant trade union to challenge Goonesinha's Labour Union, which by this date had become acceptable to both the government and the employers. The Controller of Labour reported that the manager of the Mills was "in a very embarrassing position.... for we do not seem to be dealing with a trade union, but a political body."[31]

The Malaria Epidemic of 1934-35

In common with the Ceylonese labour leaders of previous decades, the young radicals of the 'thirties were also involved in relief activity among the masses which brought them into direct contact with the problems of poverty and disease. The malaria epidemic of 1934-35 came after two seasons of severe drought and failure of crops, and according to an official report "found ready victims among a population already debilitated by lack of food owing to the economic depression."[32] The official estimate was that in the area of Ceylon affected by the epidemic, with a

29. *Ibid.*, Report of the Commission, 23 April 1933.
30. *CDN*, 25 May 1933.
31. File T. 15, *op. cit.*, Letter of 14 March 1933.
32. *Sessional Paper* 5 *of* 1936, p. 25, Report of F. C. Gimson, Commissioner of Relief.

population of 3 million (out of the island's total of 5½ million), there were 1.5 million cases of malaria by April 1935, and over 100,000 deaths between September 1934 and December 1935.

The severity of the epidemic caused conditions of famine in some districts of Ceylon, and government and private organisations made attempts to organize relief of distress in the worst stricken areas. The government appointed a Commissioner for Relief, voted half a million rupees to deal with the epidemic, and opened a Malaria Relief Fund to which a lakh was subscribed. The money was used for distributing food, clothing and medicine, and organizing relief work. Volunteers from various organizations helped in collecting supplies and making house-to-house visits distributing medicine and food.

In the Kegalle district the Suriya Mal movement was very active in providing relief. A dispensary was opened and Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe, Colvin R. de Silva, Harry, Philip and Robert Gunawardena, N. M. Perera, Robin Rutnam, Dr. Mary Rutnam, Selina Pieris and some teachers of Ananda Balika, worked in the area for many months. The house of Boralugoda Ralahamy (Philip Gunawardena's father) was the centre for the *suriya mal* workers in that area. The Commissioner of Relief in his report stated that "intelligent and systematic voluntary workers were the most efficient" and made mention of "the admirable service" rendered by the *suriya mal* workers.[33]

The devastation caused by the malaria epidemic was blamed by the Youth League and the *suriya mal* activists on the apathy of the administration. The epidemic, which was referred to as one of Ceylon's "greatest national disasters," was held to be "the direct result of the callousness and indifference of the State." The Legislature was accused of a total neglect of the peasantry during the critical years of depression, drought and epidemic, and the Ceylon National Congress, was criticised for failing to put forward a policy "for the regeneration of the villages and the improvement of the peasantry." The leader of the State Council, D. B. Jayatilaka, who was reported to have said that the malaria epidemic was due to the *karma* of the people, came under fierce attack by the members of the Youth Leagues. He was accused of avoiding "the political implications of the malaria epidemic" and of using the taxpayers money to celebrate the Royal Jubilee in 1935, "while the country was being reduced to a graveyard."[34] Colvin R. de Silva alleged that while thousands were dying of hunger and malaria, "the so-called national leaders had been entertaining Royal Dukes, celebrating Royal jubilees, hunting for knight-

33. *Ibid;* The Report of the Assistant Government Agent, Kegalle also referred to "the most useful work of the Suriya Mal Society" in Kegalle and especially to one of its members, Robin Rutnam, who made excellent arrangements for the distribution of relief. . . and performed very useful service in a locality which was particularly badly stricken," quoted in *ibid.*, p. 17.

34. *Young Ceylon*, December 1934, article on "The Epidemic;" and "Malaria and Politics" by Vernon Gunasekera, *Young Ceylon*, June 1934.

hoods, relieving the rich of their responsibility by repealing estate duty, and lightening the taxes paid by foreign exploiters."[35] The Ceylon Labour Party was blamed for failing in its "special responsibility" of rousing public opinion "to a consciousness of the needs of the poor and working classes." The enthusiasm of the party, it was stated, had been exhausted by "the craze for political heroics" and it was "more concerned with exploiting the labourer than improving his condition."[36]

The Youth League journal *Young Ceylon* described the work of the Suriya Mal movement during the epidemic as a remarkable effort by educated young men and women who had given a new meaning to the idea of relief.[37] In a report made by the Suriya Mal Malaria Relief Committee, the political importance of the work was held to be more significant than the actual relief given. The report stated that "the medical and material aid we rendered was nothing compared to the moral value of the contact" between peasants and the *suriya mal* workers:

> Not until now did we really begin to understand and appreciate the full implications of a crude feudalism, and the nature and extent of the oppression, misery, want and moral degradation that could prevail within such a system... our sympathetic treatment of the villager as our equal was a revelation to him, accustomed as he was to be bossed, abused, and treated like a dog by his so-called social superiors.[38]

The Youth League members, who launched the attack on the Ceylon National Congress and the Ceylon Labour Party for their failure to tackle the urgent problems of economic and social reform, became more than ever aware of the need in the country for a political party with a radical, nationalist programme.

Agitation in the State Council

In the years preceding the formation of the L.S.S.P., the Youth Leaguers also had their first experience of parliamentary politics. Although a section of the movement had been against contesting the elections and boycotted the elections (especially in Jaffna), another group believed that the State Council would be a valuable forum for agitation and propaganda. S. A. Wickremasinghe, who had been active in the Suriya Mal campaign, malaria relief work and in the Wellawatte strike, was elected in the 1931 elections for Morawaka. From 1931 to 1936 Wickremasinghe kept up a vigorous attack in the State Council on the British colonial government and on the political and economic policies of the Ceylonese Board of Ministers, and used every occasion to highlight the problems facing the masses during these years of economic depression. He criticised the

35. *Ceylon Independent*, 23 December 1935.
36. *Young Ceylon*, December 1934.
37. *Young Ceylon*, September 1935.
38. *ibid.*

medical and social service facilities, advocated minimum wages, and made an important dissenting report on the Commission on child servants. He opposed wasteful expenditure on Royal visits and on the occasion of the King's Jubilee in 1935, moved an amendment to the message of loyalty which stated: "The condition of the masses has not improved one bit within the 25 years of your Majesty's reign... they are subjected to disabilities, harsh legislation and exploitation... and the fruits of this negligence and criminal indifference of Your Majesty's advisers has been garnered in the shape of poverty, disease and starvation."[39] During the malaria epidemic, Wickremasinghe constantly exposed the inadequacy of the relief services and claimed that the lesson of the epidemic was "the need for political emancipation."[40]

In the State Council, Wickremasinghe also led the campaign of opposition to the Trade Union Act of 1935. The Ceylon Government had tried to pass repressive legislation to control trade unions in 1929; but this had been rejected by Lord Passfield (Sidney Webb), the Secretary of State for the Colonies in the 1929 Labour government, and only a non-controversial ordinance to govern trade disputes was passed in 1931. By 1935, however, when Ceylon was beginning to recover from the after effects of the depression and renewed labour activity was therefore a possibility, the first ordinance to regulate trade unions was adopted by the legislature.

The main provisions of the Trade Union Ordinance of 1935 were the compulsory registration of all trade unions, regulations that contributions by members with respect to the political fund of a trade union could not be deducted unless specifically made by each member, and provision that not more than half the officials of a trade union could be "outsiders," i.e. persons not employed in the industry. The Youth Leagues claimed that by this ordinance the government was trying to crush the trade union movement. In the State Council, as a member of the standing committee to discuss the ordinance, S. A. Wickremasinghe wrote a dissenting rider which stated:

> The Bill is designed to restrict the legitimate activities of workers to form trade unions, but does not provide any protection against victimisation by the employers... In a country where there is no legislation for insurance against unemployment, sickness, old age, maternity, accidents and any other form of social insurance, it is very unwise to introduce legislation to restrict the formation and activities of voluntary association.[41]

39. *CDN*, 8 May 1935.
40. *Hansard*, Debate of January 15, 1935, p. 34.
41. Labour Department, File T. 1., Part II.

The Formation of the L.S.S.P.

In the years before 1935, the Youth Leagues had agitated on several fronts. The nationalist agitation of the Youth Leagues and the Suriya Mal movement were an expression of hostility to British rule. The relief work done during the malaria campaign served to highlight the poverty of the rural masses and the feudal oppression that existed in the villages. During the severe economic depression, when A. E. Goonesinha had abandoned militant trade unionism, the Youth Leagues led the struggle for trade union rights and workers' demands. In addition they used the State Council as a platform from which all these political and economic problems could be publicised.

The need for a separate political party to carry on political and trade union agitation was felt, and in December 1935, the most active members of the Youth Leagues founded the Lanka Sama Samaja Party. The new party issued a manifesto which was intended to be a broad programme of twenty two "immediate demands for day to day agitation and struggle." The manifesto claimed that the aims of the party were the attainment of national independence, the abolition of social and economic inequality and oppression arising from differences of class, caste, race, creed or sex, and the socialization of the means of production, distribution and exchange. However, specific measures involving socialization were not included among the twenty two demands, which enumerated the legislative measures needed to ameliorate economic and social conditions. On behalf of urban workers, the manifesto called for minimum wages, unemployment insurance and relief, an eight-hour day, factory legislation, slum clearance, cheaper housing and the abolition of compulsory registration for tradeunions. Relief for the peasantry was urged in the form of free pasture lands, seed paddy free of interest, and the abolition of irrigation rates and forest laws relating to the removal of brushwood. In the interests of the young, demands were made for free school books, free meals, free milk and the abolition of child labour. On economic questions the manifesto advocated higher income tax, estate duty, the abolition of Imperial preference on goods from countries in the Empire, the abolition of the quota on cheap goods from Japan and the abolition of indirect taxation which affected goods consumed by the poor. The manifesto also urged the use of the Sinhala and Tamil languages in the lower courts, police stations and government departments.[42]

This was a programme of minimum demands intended to popularise the new party among wide sections of the population. None of the demands called for revolutionary change as the party at its formation did not intend to establish itself as a Marxist party, although an inner group

42. *Young Ceylon*, February 1936.

of Trotskyists existed in the party.[42] Organisationally, the party was not a tightly-knit revolutionary party with a restricted membership. L.S.S.P. membership was open to anyone who affirmed that he was a Socialist and agreed with the aims of the party. Since there was no strong nationalist movement led by the bourgeoisie, the need of the day was felt to be the establishment of a party which would lead the struggle for democratic rights and political independence. In addition, as there was no militant trade union movement which could express the demands of the proletariat, there was an urgent need for a radical political movement to give leadership and direction to the working people of the country. These two objectives were fused when the Lanka Sama Samaja Party was formed by the militant young nationalists and socialists who had led the struggles of the early 'thirties.

In conclusion, brief mention can be made of the way in which these two roles interacted with each other. It was inevitable that, in the absence of an anti-imperialist struggle led by the bourgeoisie, the L.S.S.P. had to take on this role and broaden the party to include non-revolutionary elements. But in doing so its ability to function as a purely revolutionary cadre party was blunted. On the other hand, the L.S.S.P. leadership was composed of several Marxists equipped with revolutionary theory, whose outlook was international. Such an outlook prevented the L.S.S.P. from taking a purely nationalist stand on issues such as race, religion and language which are often the driving forces of a nationalist movement.

An understanding of the background events leading to the formation of the L.S.S.P. and the dual task it had to perform provides some clues to analysing the subsequent history of the party, including the illegal period during the war, the post-war upsurge of general strikes, the setback after the 1953 hartal, the decision in 1964 to join a coalition with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the presence today of the L.S.S.P. in the United Front Government.

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43. The inner group of Trotskyists in the L.S.S.P. consisted of Philip Gunawardena, Leslie Goonewardena, N. M. Perera and Colvin R. de Silva. The split in the party on the question of "Trotskyism" and "Stalinism" took place in 1940 when the "Stalinist" group led by Dr. S. A. Wickremasinghe was expelled. In 1943 this group formed the Ceylon Communist Party.