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Sri Lanka

An invitation to carry forward the Nava Samasamaja tradition

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'Yes. I joined the United National Party (UNP).'

'I will lighten up the UNP'

'Had Marx been alive today, he would shake hands with [former Prime Minister of Sri Lanka and leader of the UNP] Ranil Wickremesinghe and embrace him'

The quotations above were extracted from recent statements issued by Professor Vikramabahu 'Bahu' Karunaratne to print and electronic media.

Appearing on the Derana TV channel, dressed in a green shirt [the colour of the bourgeois UNP], he unabashedly opined that one should not be ashamed to change his or her political stance. He repeated this statement to different media and on UNP platforms.

Vikramabahu is contesting the election as a candidate of the UNP. This time, the UNP is contesting the election without entering into an alliance with any other political party. Therefore, instead of allying with the UNP, Vikramabahu is now running in the Kalutara district as a member of the UNP.

Vikramabahu entered politics in the nineteen sixties as a radical Samasamaja (socialist) youth leader. When in 1964 the Lanka Samasamaja Party (LSSP) entered into a coalition with the Sirimavo Bandaranayake government, Vikramabahu was one of the leaders in the party that rose in revolt against this decision.

When in 1978 the Nava Samasamaja Party (NSSP) was formed, the majority of the radical youth of LSSP, as well as political intellectuals and trade unionists in public and private sectors (including the Government Clerical Services Union) joined the new party. Charismatic leaders of the calibre of Vasudava and Vikramabahu gave leadership to the 1980 July general strike and were seen as an inspiration to the people.

Because of this background, Vikramabahu is seen as a political leader engaged in revolutionary politics.

The NSSP under the leadership of 'Bahu' rendered a valuable service in moving forward the left tradition of the LSSP. It fought for a political solution to the national question and stood against the politics of forming coalitions with the bourgeoisie. Now this heritage is wasted, buried at the feet of Ranil Wickramasinghe.

Those who struggled against the bureaucratic leadership of Vikramabahu left the party to form their own political organisations. Comrade Sirirtunga left the party to form the United Socialist Party.

At the time when the identity of the NSSP became seriously eroded a majority of the Central Committee of the political bureau decided to lay the foundation for a political movement to preserve and promote the ideals of the party. In 2012 we organized under the banner of Left Voice to carry on the tradition of the NSSP and to continue to struggle against the anti-left politics of Bahu. Working together comradesly with all left groups our political aim is to mobilize the mass organizations, especially the trade unions, on the basis of a political platform. We also carried out our struggle against the 'theories' of Vikramabahu in the international arena. As Left Voice we were admitted to membership of the Fourth International and its secretariat officially rejected the political line of Vikramabahu. This is another victory for our struggle.

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During the past few years Bahu has been advancing a false political analysis and argued that the leader of the UNP, Ranil Wikramasing, is a 'liberal Social Democrat' fighting racialism, religious bigotry, and fascism. Bahu has wholeheartedly embraced him. The final episode of this charade is Bahu obtaining the membership of UNP and standing for election in the Kalutara district under the symbol of the UNP symbol, the elephant. Now it is crystal clear. When Bahu is contesting the elections under the UNP banner, is this not a good reason to be heart stricken? Will this sight not stir the consciousness of those who sympathized with the anti-racialist politics of the NSSP? How many sympathizers of the NSSP can wholeheartedly support this decision of Bahu?

In the past, labour movement leaders Vasudeva who became frustrated with the weakening of the movement, joined the camp of so-called progressives like then president Chandrika Kumaratunga. At the time, Vasudeva said that Chandrika Kumaratunga was a Social Democrat and a left-leaning leader who stood for national unity in opposing racialism and religious bigotry. To realize these goals, he reasoned, we should cooperate with her. Back then, Vikramabahu stood unequivocally against such politics of coalitions with capitalist forces. Back then, he stood resolutely to protect the identity of the party.

Today, Bahu is following in the footsteps of Vasudeva. Since about 2012, he has unashamedly refurbished the theory of Vasudeva. Bahu introduced into the NSSP a project a supporting UNP leader Ranil Wikramasinghe, and painted him as a Social Democrat opposing racialism and religious bigotry.

It is true that a few leaders of the NSSP waged a long struggle against such trends within the party. Still others supported Bahu in a sincere belief they could move forward the illustrious history of the party and its struggle for a political solution to the national question. Initially such people said they would not compromise their politics. They said they were allying with capitalist parties not as partners of governance but only as partners in the struggle against the fascistic forces.

The comrades who formed as Left Voice warned that this erroneous political path would end in an abominable capitulation. But even they did not believe that this prediction would come true so soon.

Dear comrades, Vikramabahu has not only joined the UNP but also agreed to contest the election under their name. He has committed a shameful political capitulation.

We know that some left-wing leaders joined hands with the UNP. Notably the late Philip Goonawardane, a founding member of the LSSP, joined hands with the UNP in an agreement to become a coalition partner. We know leaders of LSSP joined with the SLFP to sign an agreement with some proposals and conditions of interest to the working class. And to preserve his political identity, Vasudeva entered into his partnership with Chandrika under a hurriedly set up contraption of a party.

All those were nothing more than outright capitulations. Vikramabahu once styled himself as an outstanding internationalist Trotskyist. By obtaining the membership of the reactionary UNP, Vikramabahu has committed a similar capitulation and exposed his political bankruptcy.

Dear comrades,

Please take cognizance of our stand as Left Voice. We have shouldered the responsibility of advancing the political tradition of the Samasamajists. We nurture and promote the political vision of our martyrs, of the comrades who opposed so-called patriotism and in the name of the party dedicated their lives to justice for the Tamil people.

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In brotherhood,

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For more information please call us.

05th July 2020

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