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# **In 1939, labour protests forced Britain to recall Ceylon's colonial Home Minister**

Govindan's Death at Mool Oya Estate Sent IGP Banks Home

Tuesday 21 January 2020, by [MUDALIGE Samarasena](#) (Date first published: 19 January 2020).

**Protests after police shot a labour protester in 1939 contributed to the coalescence of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) as a party representing labourers and middle-class anticolonial activists.**

The national leaders of Sri Lanka made several attempts to take the ruling power of Sri Lanka which was a colony in every constitutional reform. When the Manning Constitution of 1924 vested power in the British Government and responsibility in the local representatives, there were many agitations against it to get the power for the local representatives. As a result, the State Council was set up by the Donoughmore Constitution of 1931.

The Ceylon National Congress, founded in 1919, inspired by the Indian National Congress, was then recognised as the most powerful people's organisation in Sri Lanka. Sir D.B. Jayatilake, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, D.S. Senanayake,

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and F.R. Senanayake were prominent representatives of the Ceylon National Congress.

In the meantime, the Left Movement which was started by the Suriyamal Movement in 1933 formed the first political party in Sri Lanka on 18 December 1935 as the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).

But while the country's elite class continued to fall in line with the British Government, the LSSP was formed, by the Member of the State Council for Morawaka Dr. S .A. Wickremasinghe, a young university lecturer Dr. N.M. Perera, Philip Gunawardena alias the Lion of Boralugoda who came back from the United States of America and one of the great historians and a young lawyer Dr. Colvin R. de Silva, as a weapon against colonialism.

The majority who were gathered around this party were more nationalist and liberal than Marxist.

Although not Marxists, young patriots like Horana's Wilmot A. Perera, W. P. Wijekulasuriya of Galle, H. A. C. Wickramaratne of Kandy, M. Chittampalam of Jaffna joined the LSSP.

In the meantime, patriots such as Member of the State Council for Hambantota D. M. Rajapaksa and President of the Jaffna Youth Congress Handy Perimbanayagam became powerful social activists.

In the meantime, the Socialist leaders' becoming active against the Second World War resulted in the banning of the party and the arrest of the party leaders on 18 June 1940. In April 1942, four LSSP leaders escaped from prison and left the country in secret and it was a slap on the face for the British Government.

During this period, the LSSP became more and more popular, especially among workers. The leftist ideas rapidly spread, especially among the plantation workers in British owned tea estates.

Though the Buddhist monks didn't have much liking for the LSSP, after a series of articles written by Ven.

Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Thera in the 'Mage Sangarawa' publication which was favourable to the LSSP, the young Buddhist monks were inclined towards leftist ideas. The arrival of Ven.

Udakandewala Siri Saranankara Thera, who worked with the Socialist Party in India to Sri Lanka, increased that trend. As the LSSP was able to form workers' unions to organise workers in the plantation industry against colonialism in 1939, the LSSP was able to promote labour agitations against Second World War.

As a result, the Samasamaja Workers Union (SSU) was able to launch a strike in the large estate called Mool Oya in Uda Hewaheta. A labourer Govindan was killed by Police firing during the protest.

It was revealed that the shooting could have been prevented and that it was a misuse of Police power, which caused a serious conflict within the British Administration.

The Governor was of the view that the Home Minister in charge of the Police should take responsibility for this. The Home Minister in charge of the Police was the Leader of the House Sir. D.B. Jayatilake.

But the Board of Ministers of the State Council decided that the responsibility of it should be taken by the IGP Philip Norton Banks. The Board of Ministers who were strongly against the decision of the Governor resigned from their posts.

With the resignation of Sir D. B. Jayathilaka, Home Minister; D. S. Senanayake, Minister of Agriculture; S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, Minister of Local Government; C. W. W. Kannangara, Minister of Education;

J. L. Kotelawala, Minister of Communications and Transport; W.A. de Silva, Minister of Health; and G. C. S. Corea, Minister of Trade, there was a big commotion in the country.

The LSSP held a massive public rally under the theme of 'Send Banks home' at the Galle Face Green in Colombo. The rally was held with the patronage of the Leader of the party Colvin R. de Silva and D.M. Rajapaksa of Hambantota, Siripala Samarakkody of Narammala addressed the gathering.

Due to the war, there was a Conservative and Labour National Government in Britain, and the Colonial Office in England was aware of this situation in Sri Lanka.

They realised that the Governor's view was wrong and that serious problems would arise if Sri Lankan leaders refused to support the war. In a situation where the Indian National Congress had already refused to support the war, it was realised that it would create serious problems in Sri Lanka as well, if the Ministers resigned and refused to support Britain.

The immediate decision of the Colonial Secretary was to convince the IGP to admit guilt and to recall him to England. The death of Govindan resulted in the removal of the IGP.

It led to the spread of an idea in the youth groups of obtaining complete freedom from the British Government rather than Dominion status.

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