

Permanent Revolution and the National Question Today

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The following lecture was given by David North, the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, on February 3, 1993 in Montreal. It was in commemoration of the life and political contribution of Keerthi Balasuriya, the longtime leader of the Sri Lankan section of International Committee of the Fourth International (then called the Revolutionary Communist League). Comrade Balasuriya died tragically of a heart attack in December 1987 at the age of thirty-nine.

It is hard to believe that five years have already passed since the death of Keerthi Balasuriya. First of all, we are commemorating the life of a comrade who, if he were alive today, would only be a few months past his forty-fourth birthday. He was so very young when he died—he had just turned thirty-nine—and his death was so utterly unexpected. Keerthi looked even younger than his age; and despite his enormous knowledge and political experience, his enthusiasm and humor had an almost boyish character. And yet, there was nothing immature or careless about him. He was a man of penetrating intellectual intensity, whose political convictions had been developed and reinforced by years of systematic study.

I first saw Keerthi in the summer of 1972 at a school in England that had been organized by the Socialist Labour League, the predecessor of the Workers Revolutionary Party. He was attending a series of lectures on the history of the Fourth International; and I still recall a lengthy contribution which he made on the aborted German revolution of 1923. Keerthi addressed the school in Sinhalese, but the entire audience was captivated by the passion with which he spoke. The words seemed to flow from him like lava, and his translator—I believe it was Comrade Wijie Dias—could not, despite his best efforts, keep up. From time to time, when Keerthi realized that his translator was either floundering several sentences behind him or had failed to convey a particular phrase with the necessary precision, he would suddenly break into English to get, as best as he could, his point across.

At that time, I had no idea that Keerthi, only a few months earlier, had vehemently objected to the political line that had been taken by the Socialist Labour League on the Indian invasion of what was then East Pakistan (and which was soon to become Bangladesh). The letters which Keerthi had written in December 1971 and January 1972 protesting the SLL's endorsement of the Indian invasion were not to be seen by the other sections of the International Committee for another fourteen years—until after the split with the WRP.

It was only several years later that I had an opportunity to speak with Keerthi at length. We both attended the Sixth Congress of the International Committee in London in May 1975. That congress was held in the aftermath of the desertion of Tim Wohlforth from the Workers League. Keerthi had known Wohlforth, and was extremely interested to learn about the political issues underlying the crisis that had erupted inside the Workers League. In fact, Keerthi had last seen Wohlforth at the Fifth Congress, which had been held one year earlier. At that congress, Wohlforth's report indicated that the Workers League had suffered serious losses, including the resignations of a large number of leading members.

This information had troubled Keerthi, and he had attempted to obtain from Wohlforth a more precise political explanation for what appeared to be a serious crisis within the Workers League. However, Keerthi's questioning of Wohlforth was cut off by Healy and Banda, who were more impressed by Wohlforth's accounts of "mass recruitment" among youth than they were bothered by the loss of valuable and experienced members.

I saw Keerthi only on a few occasions during the next ten years; and, generally, under conditions which made an open exchange of political views impossible. It was not until October 1985 that it became finally possible for us to work together closely and systematically. The crisis inside the WRP had erupted; and Keerthi arrived in London toward the end of the third week of October. I had returned to the United States in order to report back to the Workers League on the situation in the WRP and the ICFI. I remember very well receiving a call from, of all people, Mike Banda on the morning of October 20. He mentioned to me that Keerthi had arrived in London and was, in fact, on the premises of the WRP. The moment the call with Banda was completed, I called the WRP headquarters on another line, and asked to speak to Keerthi. He came to the phone, and his first words were: "I have read your criticisms of the WRP's political line, and I am in agreement with them." This approach was characteristic of Comrade Keerthi. He began, always, with the political issues. During the previous day, upon his arrival in London, Banda had regaled Keerthi with the salacious details of the Healy "sex scandal." When Banda finally paused for breath, Keerthi simply asked him: "What are your political differences with Gerry Healy?" Banda was taken aback by this question; and had nothing at all to say. It was only after some considerable political stumbling that Banda, looking for a way out of his awkward predicament, handed Keerthi a copy of the political documents that I had written between 1982 and 1984.

But these documents, of no importance to Banda beyond their immediate utilitarian and factional value, were of essential significance to Keerthi. For more than a decade, the Revolutionary Communist League had been virtually isolated within the International Committee. Its 1972 criticisms of the developing opportunism of the SLL/WRP were unknown. It had been subjected to a series of disloyal and disruptive provocations by Healy, Banda, and Slaughter. The WRP concocted false reports about the work of the RCL aimed at discrediting its leadership in the eyes of the other sections of the International Committee. The aim of these attacks was to undermine the struggle of the RCL for the historically-developed principles and program of the Fourth International, to which Keerthi and his comrades in the RCL leadership were passionately devoted. Keerthi was a leader of a party which was profoundly rooted in the entire history of the Fourth International and the proud representative of its greatest traditions.

Despite all the terrible difficulties that the WRP had created for the RCL and for Keerthi personally, there was not a trace of subjectivism or bitterness in the reaction of Keerthi to the political crisis that had erupted

in the fall of 1985. Rather, he saw in this crisis an opportunity to rearm the International Committee with a Trotskyist program and launch a worldwide offensive against the opportunism which had, over so many years, weakened the Fourth International.

The period between October 1985 and December 1987 was the most politically rewarding and, I dare say, the happiest, of Keerthi's life. He played an irreplaceable and decisive role in the theoretical and political renaissance of the International Committee.

At Comrade Keerthi's funeral, on December 23, 1987, I said that the coming generation of revolutionary workers and youth would draw youth their inspiration not from the Mao Zedongs or Ho Chi Minhs or Fidel Castros or any of the other representatives of bourgeois nationalism and petty-bourgeois radicalism masquerading as Marxists. Rather, the revolutionary fighters of the future would learn from the political example of Keerthi Balasuriya. The events of the past five years have demonstrated that there was not a trace of exaggeration in that tribute. The events of the last five years have dealt pitiless blows to the reputations of all the so-called Great Men of the Stalinist pantheon whose political careers were based upon political deceit and theoretical charlatantry. But these events have vindicated the power of the historical perspectives of Marxism and the scientific method upon which it is based.

Keerthi's political life spanned somewhat more than twenty years. All those years were devoted to the defense of the genuine traditions of revolutionary Marxism. However, it was his fate to conduct this defense of Marxism under conditions in which the political life of the international workers movement was dominated by the most grotesque forms of political opportunism. This opportunism had at its disposal immense material resources; but these resources could not, forever, save it from the inexorable consequences of its own political, ideological and moral bankruptcy. The pretentious fictions of the past are all being exposed. The Maos, the Hoxhas, the Hos, the Titos, the Castros—and all the other revolutionary celebrities of the post-World War II era—will be remembered as political impostors and theoretical charlatans. All their supposed achievements were built upon rotten foundations. The political shambles they created have either crumbled or are crumbling ignominiously. In most cases, death enabled them to escape the devastating consequences of their betrayals. It is the working class which has been left to pay the price. Only Castro, it seems, has lived long enough to witness the consequences of his cynical bargain with Stalinism. But regardless of their personal fates, all these false heroes—to which, by the way, many others could be added—have this in common: Not one of them contributed anything of enduring political value to the cause of the international working class. Rather, they exploited, misled, and betrayed it.

Keerthi, on the other hand, will be remembered as one of the finest representatives of the great school of revolutionary Marxism as it was taught by Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg. The problems with which he grappled are bound up with the most essential problems of revolutionary strategy in the epoch of imperialism.

To appreciate the significance of Keerthi's life and the critical importance of the principles and perspectives for which he fought in the present period, it is necessary to review the great political struggles of the twentieth century within which his personal political development were rooted. We must, therefore, go back nearly ninety years, to the early years of this century when Russian Marxists were debating various conceptions of the revolution for which they were preparing.

Russia was, at the turn of the century, the least developed of the major capitalist powers of the day. Its political structure, under the dictatorial rule of a reactionary and obscurantist monarchy, was of a semifeudal character. The great majority of the population consisted of peasants who lived in abysmal poverty and ignorance. Only in the last decade of the nineteenth century had there emerged, on the basis of new and rapid

industrial development, a significant working class. But its numbers were, relative to the population of Russia, quite small and concentrated in a few urban centers.

At the turn of the century, Marxists in Russia were agreed that the principal tasks of the coming revolution would be of a democratic character: that is, it would sweep away the semifeudal state structure and destroy all that remained of feudal relations in the countryside. The great landed estates of the Russian nobility would be broken up and land would be distributed to the peasantry.

Analyzed from the standpoint of its historic tasks, the revolution anticipated by Russian Marxists was defined as bourgeois democratic. However, disagreements arose over the political relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in the achievement of the democratic revolution and the political and state forms through which the democratic revolution would be realized.

The father of Russian Marxism, Georgi V. Plekhanov, maintained that the Russian Revolution could aspire to produce no more than a democratic republic, modeled on those which had been created in Western Europe and North America on the basis of the great democratic revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Russian Revolution, he reasoned at the start of the twentieth century, would produce essentially the same result as the French Revolution of 1789-1794: the overthrow of absolutism would place political power in the hands of the bourgeoisie. There would then ensue a more or less protracted period of bourgeois rule during which, within the framework of a liberal democracy, the working class would be schooled in political struggle and prepared for the future realization of socialism. In terms of political strategy, Plekhanov's line meant that the party of the working class could not aspire to the leadership of the coming revolution. Rather, it had to cede the leading role to the political parties of the bourgeoisie and accept their claim to power. The Russian Social Democracy had to work as the loyal ally of the bourgeois parties.

It was here that Lenin, who had once been a devoted pupil of Plekhanov, parted company with his teacher. Lenin accepted the definition of the Russian Revolution as bourgeois; but he advanced an altogether different conception of its class dynamics. While Plekhanov took for granted the political hegemony of the bourgeoisie in the coming revolution, Lenin argued that this class was far too conservative, too inclined to compromise, and too fearful of the masses to carry through the struggle that would be required to cleanse Russia of all the political and social remnants of feudalism. In opposition to the alliance between the proletariat and liberal bourgeoisie proposed by Plekhanov, Lenin advocated an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry, whose goal would be the achievement of a "democratic dictatorship" under the leadership of these two classes.

Lenin's formula was certainly more radical than Plekhanov's; and its tactical line was entirely different. Whereas Plekhanov insisted upon the political leadership of the bourgeoisie in the democratic revolution and argued that it was necessary for the working class, in the interest of a political alliance with the liberal capitalists, to abstain from any too-radical measures that might drive the bourgeoisie into the camp of reaction, Lenin insisted that the working class had to conduct its struggle entirely independently of the bourgeois parties and their inevitable equivocations. Only the alliance of the working class with the most radical sections of the peasants, pushing the agrarian overturn to the limit and settling accounts ruthlessly with the old tsarist apparatus, could ensure the victory of the democratic revolution.

There was, however, an incongruity in Lenin's political perspective. Despite its clear departure from the accommodating line of Plekhanov, which denied any independent role to the working class, Lenin's perspective did not foresee any encroachments by the revolution on bourgeois property itself. Moreover, the conception of a "democratic

dictatorship" of two classes was inherently vague.

A third conception, more radical and more internally consistent, was advanced by Trotsky. Basing himself on a world-historical conception, Trotsky argued that the position of the Russian bourgeoisie (as in all countries with a belated bourgeois development) was fundamentally different from that of the French bourgeoisie of 1789. It was no longer in a position to make its own "bourgeois" revolution. The events of 1848 had demonstrated that the attitude of the bourgeoisie to the tasks of the democratic revolution was determined, above all, by the class dynamics of the society in which it lived. The growth of the working class posed to the bourgeoisie a far greater danger than the tsarist autocracy. Moreover, the peasantry was organically incapable of playing an independent political role. However influential its political role, it can act only on the perspective of another class. Thus, the decisive role in the democratic revolution was to be played by the working class; and it could be consummated only in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Furthermore, the proletariat would not be able to limit itself to purely democratic tasks; it would be compelled to make inroads into bourgeois property and, therefore, the democratic revolution would assume an ever more overt socialist character.

The proletarian revolution in Russia would produce explosive reverberations throughout the world; and Trotsky argued that the survival of proletarian rule in Russia and the possibility of socialist construction in a backward society depended upon the extension of the revolution beyond its borders.

The relation of the Russian Revolution to the world socialist revolution constituted the essential foundation of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. With a consistency and far-sightedness that was unequaled by any of his contemporaries, Lenin not excluded, Trotsky insisted that the character of the Russian Revolution would be determined, in the final analysis, not by national, but by international, conditions. To the Menshevik pedants, who continuously argued that Russia was too economically backward to embark upon a program of socialist economic development, Trotsky replied that Russian economic potentialities could not be properly evaluated only from the standpoint of its national stage of development and the national resources at its disposal. The real dynamics of Russian development could be understood only within the context of the world economy and the international political relations within which it actually existed.

Forced by world conditions into a state of semicolonial dependence upon the developed imperialist economies of Britain and France, the Russian bourgeoisie, Trotsky maintained, was incapable of resolving any of the historical tasks associated with the democratic revolutions of the past.

The inability of the Russian bourgeoisie to lead and complete the democratic revolution was itself, as Trotsky explained, the expression of a world-historical phenomenon: the impossibility of resolving, in the epoch of imperialism, any of the basic problems of humanity on a national basis. Imperialism, based on the global development of the productive forces of capitalism, sounded the death knell of the national state itself. The forces of the world economy had outgrown the political framework of the nation-state system within which capitalism is rooted.

For the working class in a backward country, the logic of the political struggle to eradicate the legacy of feudalism led inexorably toward the conquest of power and the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, once it had established its dictatorship, the Russian proletariat, or that of any other backward country, would confront, on the one hand, the inherent limitations of the national economy, and, on the other hand, the ferocious hostility of the international bourgeoisie.

Therefore, the survival of proletarian power and the eventual advance to socialism depended upon, not only the sympathy of the working classes in the advanced countries, but, in the final analysis, upon their victory over

their own national bourgeoisie. As Trotsky had said as early as 1907: "Without the direct State support of the European proletariat the working class of Russia cannot remain in power and convert its temporary dictatorship into a socialist dictatorship" (*Permanent Revolution & Results and Prospects* [London: New Park, 1975], p. 237).

The outbreak of the First World War vindicated Trotsky's insistence on the primacy of the international situation over national factors. The imperialist war signified, in essence, the impossibility of peacefully reconciling the productive forces of world capitalism with the outmoded nation-state. Both the working class in the advanced as well as backward countries faced a common dilemma: The solution to all the fundamental problems of human society was to be found only at the level of world economic development and through the medium of international revolutionary struggle.

This scientific conception underlay Trotsky's appraisal of all political problems. Even while he recognized, as did Lenin, the right of oppressed nations to self-determination, Trotsky's support of this element of the democratic program was nonetheless of a sharply critical character. Though he emphatically opposed the forcible incorporation of small nations into a large state, Trotsky insisted that social democracy, as he wrote in 1915, "does not transform the national principle into some kind of absolute idea, standing above history."

"[N]ation and economy have come into contradiction—with the state and with each other. The state has become too narrow for the economy. Striving to expand, it tramples upon the nation. The economy, for its part, refuses to subordinate the natural movement of its forces and resources to the distribution of ethnic groups on the earth's surface" (*Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary international* [New York:Monad, 1984], pp. 370-71).

No event in history had such an immense and electrifying impact upon the consciousness of the masses of the world as the October Revolution. The conquest of power by the working class in a vast territory comprising one-sixth the earth's surface, populated by scores of ethnic groups and nationalities, provided a tremendous impulse to the movement of the masses in the vast portion of the globe ruled either directly or through somewhat veiled mechanisms by the imperialist powers.

The October Revolution provided not only moral inspiration, but also profound strategic lessons for the masses of the backward countries of Africa, the Middle East, and, especially, Asia, where the movement against imperialist domination had begun to acquire a gigantic scope. The decisive questions—through what methods and on the basis of what program would the colonial masses attain liberation from imperialism?—had been given practical answers by the October Revolution. As in Russia, the tasks confronting the masses in China and India—to speak of the most significant of the backward countries in Asia—were essentially of a democratic character: liberation from colonial oppression, national unification, and the lifting of the yoke of feudal relations from the back of the peasantry. From the standpoint of a formal political definition, the tasks confronting China and India were essentially those that had been "solved" by the great bourgeois democratic revolutions of previous centuries in Western Europe and North America. Therefore, in accordance with the political logic of Menshevism, the political leadership of the anti-imperialist movement in India and China belonged to the national bourgeoisie and its aims could be realized only in the form of an independent bourgeois republic.

But the same historical paradox that had refuted Menshevism in Russia existed in India and China. The bourgeois leaderships of the national movement were confronted with a rapidly growing workers movement whose social struggles threatened its essential economic interests. Moreover, it was impossible, on the basis of a national revolution, led by the bourgeoisie (even if one were prepared to accept that the bourgeoisie was capable of providing revolutionary leadership) for these oppressed countries to free themselves from the economic grip of imperialism. The

theory of permanent revolution was, therefore, no less relevant to the emerging proletariat of Asia than it had been to the working class of Russia.

The documents of the Comintern between 1919 and 1922 which were concerned with the colonial question, particularly those of the Second and Fourth Congresses, were elaborated on the basis of the theory of permanent revolution. While taking into account the varying levels of economic and industrial development in the backward countries and the corresponding strength of the working class, the resolutions of the Comintern insisted upon the political independence of the workers movement, even if it existed only in embryonic form, from the parties and organizations of the native bourgeoisie.

The orientation of the Communist International changed radically after Lenin's death. The unveiling of the theory of "socialism in one country" by Stalin and Bukharin in 1924 provided the ideological foundation for the Soviet regime's abandonment of the program of world socialist revolution and the subordination of the international workers movement to the Stalinist bureaucracy's defense of its own material interests.

It is beyond the scope of this lecture to deal in any detail with the political struggle waged by Trotsky and the Left Opposition against this fundamental revision of Marxism or with the tragic consequences of this theory for the Soviet Union and, indeed, the international working class. But we must, if only briefly, refer to events in China because the study of their tragic lessons played so fundamental a role in the political education of Comrade Keerthi.

In a practical sense, it can be said that Stalin's courtship with Chiang Kaishek and the bourgeois Kuomintang—for which the Chinese working class was to pay such a terrible price—flowed directly from the opportunist considerations which motivated the elaboration of the theory of "socialism in one country."

According to this theory, the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union did not depend upon the conquest of power by the working class in the advanced countries. Rather, socialism could be realized within the USSR based on its own internal resources. However, Stalin did not altogether discount the significance of the Comintern and its influence in the international working class in assisting the Soviet Union's realization of socialism. According to the Kremlin, socialism could be built in the USSR provided that imperialism did not launch a military attack.

Thus the Comintern could be of use in averting this danger by either cultivating alliances with bourgeois regimes or by exerting pressure, through the medium of national labor movements, for a favorable attitude on the part of bourgeois governments toward the USSR.

In England such a policy was implemented in 1925-1926 through the formation of the Anglo-Russian Committee—which led to the betrayal of the British General Strike.

In China the Stalinist bureaucracy sought to cultivate the friendship of the Kuomintang and its leader, Chiang Kaishek. Stalin instructed the Chinese Communist Party to subordinate itself to the political discipline of the Kuomintang, which was defined as a "bloc of four classes:" the workers, the peasants, the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie.

In May 1926 the Kuomintang was admitted into the Communist International as a sympathizing party and Chiang Kaishek was made an "honorary member" of its presidium.

The glorification of the Kuomintang and Chiang took place against the backdrop of a rising wave of revolutionary struggle by the working class and peasantry. The growth of the mass movement intensified the conflict between the Chinese bourgeoisie and the working class and drove the former ever more openly into the arms of imperialism. But the differentiation of class forces was denied by the Stalinist leadership of the Comintern, on the grounds that the national oppression of China subjugated all classes and drove them into revolutionary struggle against imperialism. In opposition to this false conception, Trotsky argued:

"It is a gross mistake to think that imperialism mechanically welds together all the classes of China from without... The revolutionary struggle against imperialism does not weaken, but rather strengthens the political differentiation of the classes. Imperialism is a highly powerful force in the internal relationships of China. The main source of this force is not the warships in the waters of the Yangste Kiang—they are only auxiliaries—but the economic and political bond between foreign capital and the native bourgeoisie. The struggle against imperialism, precisely because of its economic and military power, demands a powerful exertion of forces from the very depths of the Chinese people... But everything that brings the oppressed and exploited masses of the toilers to their feet, inevitably pushes the national bourgeoisie into an open bloc with the imperialists. The class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the masses of workers and peasants is not weakened, but, on the contrary, it is sharpened by imperialist oppression, to the point of bloody civil war at every serious conflict" (*Leon Trotsky on China* [New York: Anchor, 1976], p.161).

The warnings of the Left Opposition were tragically vindicated by the massacre of thousands of members of the Communist Party in Shanghai on April 12, 1927, by the troops of Chiang Kaishek. The Comintern tried to deny its responsibility for this catastrophic defeat by arguing that Chiang's coup represented the betrayal of only a small section of the Kuomintang, the "right wing" consisting of the national bourgeoisie. The Stalinists counterposed to Chiang the "left wing" of the Kuomintang, which supposedly represented 90 percent of the "bloc of four classes" and was centered in the "left" Kuomintang government in Wuhan. But in July 1927 the Wuhan government turned savagely against the working class, massacring members of the Communist Party and militant workers. Confronted with the complete collapse of his policies, Stalin sanctioned the desperate adventure known as the Canton Commune, which ended in disaster. By the beginning of 1928, the Chinese Communist Party, which only one year before had numbered in the tens of thousands, had virtually ceased to exist.

The historical consequences of this defeat are virtually incalculable. Its most immediate result was the further isolation of the Left Opposition and its political defeat. Beyond that, the defeat of the Chinese Revolution was not "merely" delayed by twenty years. The Communist Party of Mao Zedong which came to power in 1949 was one whose political physiognomy and social composition had been so profoundly, in a negative sense, transformed by the consequences of the 1927 defeat that it was hardly, in a Marxist sense, a workers party at all.

It is evident that the theory of "socialism in one country" led quite consciously and directly to an opportunist reorientation of Comintern strategy toward defensive alliances aimed at relieving imperialist pressure on the Soviet Union. However, apart from the crass calculations of Stalin, the glorification of Chiang flowed logically from the theoretical conceptions which underlay the program of national socialism. At the heart of Stalin's "theory" was an entirely different definition of the historical epoch. In contradistinction to the theory of permanent revolution, the Stalinist conception of the epoch attributed to the national-state form of economic organization considerable potential. From this it followed that the national bourgeoisie in the backward countries could still play a historically progressive role. Trotsky, on the other hand, rejected such a possibility because, in the final analysis, the colonial bourgeoisie not only rested upon outmoded property relations, but also because its existence was rooted in a national-state form which constituted the chief barrier to the rational development of man's productive forces.

Trotsky retained an intense interest in the development of the revolutionary movement in Asia. He was keenly aware of the significance of the colonial masses' struggle against imperialist domination. But he continued, as before, to reject the claim of the national bourgeoisie to hegemony in the leadership of the democratic revolution. In this regard, his comments on the African National Congress, written in 1934 to a

group of supporters in South Africa, are worth recalling:

"The Bolshevik-Leninists unmask before the native masses the inability of the Congress to achieve the realization of even its own demands, because of its superficial, conciliatory policy. In contradistinction to the Congress, the Bolshevik-Leninists develop a program of revolutionary class struggle" (*Writings of Leon Trotsky [1934-35]* [New York: Pathfinder, 1974], p. 252).

There was yet another, and more profound, aspect of Trotsky's evaluation of the bourgeois national movements. While he paid full tribute to the mighty mass movements developing in the backward countries, Trotsky's attitude toward the perspective of "national liberation"—to the extent that this was conceived as a fundamentally "national" task—was unequivocally critical. For example, in his 1934 manifesto, "War and the Fourth International," Trotsky declared:

"It must be clearly understood beforehand that the belated revolutions in Asia and Africa are incapable of opening up a new epoch of renaissance for the national state. The liberation of the colonies will be merely a gigantic episode in the world socialist revolution, just as the belated democratic overturn in Russia, which was also a semicolonial country, was only the introduction to the socialist revolution...

"The national problem merges everywhere with the social. Only the conquest of power by the world proletariat can assure a real and lasting freedom of development for all nations of our planet" (*Writings of Leon Trotsky [1933-34]*, p. 306).

His comments on India, which was in the throes of a mighty movement against colonial oppression, were especially acute. In July 1939 Trotsky, anticipating that the outbreak of the Second World War would tremendously accelerate the revolutionary movement in the colonies against imperialism, addressed a letter to the workers of India, in which he denounced the Stalinist betrayal of the struggle against colonialism and called for the building of a section of the Fourth International in India.

"The Indian bourgeoisie," he wrote, "is incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle. They are closely bound up with and dependent upon British capitalism. They tremble for their own property. They stand in fear of the masses. They seek compromise with British imperialism no matter what the price, and lull the Indian masses with hopes of reforms from above. The leader and prophet of this bourgeoisie is Gandhi. A fake leader and a false prophet!" (*Writings of Leon Trotsky [1939-40]*, p. 29).

Trotsky's appeal bore fruit in Ceylon. Since 1935 there had existed the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which had been formed as a radical anti-imperialist organization. It gained support within the working class, and as it did, the LSSP moved steadily toward the left. In early 1940, as the political program of the LSSP assumed a more precise Marxist character, it expelled from membership those whom it identified with Stalinism. This evolution found expression in the elaboration of its international responsibilities. Subjecting its own early program to a critical evaluation, the LSSP leadership expressed dissatisfaction with its previous conception of a "national" revolution in Ceylon and declared that the revolutionary socialist movement on the island had to be built as an essential component of an all-Indian revolutionary movement. On this basis the LSSP entered the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India and, at approximately the same time, sought affiliation with the Fourth International.

The LSSP assumed the leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle in Ceylon, in opposition to the Stalinists, who were allied with British imperialism.

Thus, in Ceylon, due to the courageous struggle of the Trotskyists, the ideological and political independence of the working class was established. This was an achievement which the Stalinists in India neither attempted nor were capable of. There, they trailed miserably behind the bourgeois Congress of Gandhi and Nehru. However, in Ceylon, on the basis of a proletarian internationalist program, the Trotskyists won the leadership of the mass movement against British imperialism. This

achievement is, moreover, noteworthy from a historico-theoretical standpoint. It demonstrates that the widespread assumption that the anti-imperialist struggle, that is, the fight against colonial domination, is and must be simply a national struggle simplifies reality to the point of distortion and actually mystifies the social dynamic of the mass anti-imperialist movement. The strength of the BLPI's intervention stemmed from the fact that the Trotskyists based their struggle on the perspective of international rather than national liberation. Despite the subsequent betrayal of the LSSP (into which the BLPI merged in 1950), this historic contribution created a powerful political tradition which inspired the founding of the Revolutionary Communist League and provided the foundation upon which Keerthi's future political development was based.

Only a few months before his assassination, Trotsky assessed for the last time the historical tasks which confronted the working class in the backward countries. He warned that no positive solution to the problems of the colonial masses could emerge from the imperialist war unless colonial domination was ended through socialist revolution. "The hopes of liberation of the colonial peoples," he wrote, "are therefore bound up even more decisively than ever before with the emancipation of the workers of the whole world. The colonies shall be freed, politically, economically, and culturally, only when the workers of the advanced countries put an end to capitalist rule and set out together with the backward peoples to reorganize world economy on a new level gearing it to social needs and not to monopolist profits. Only in this way will the colonial and semicolonial countries be enabled to emerge from their varying stages of backwardness and take their place as integral sections of an advancing world socialist commonwealth" (*Documents of the Fourth International: The Formative Years 1933-40*, [New York: Pathfinder, 1973], p.394).

The events which followed the Second World War provided tragic vindication of Trotsky's prognosis. As developments in India were to demonstrate, the formal granting of state independence did not in any fundamental sense represent the realization of the democratic aspirations of the Indian masses. If anything, the terms of independence provided irrefutable proof of the thoroughly reactionary character of the national bourgeoisie. The partition of India, which set the pattern that was to be reproduced in so many tragic forms throughout the postwar period, preserved the interests of imperialism. It provided the medium through which imperialism and the national bourgeoisie could encourage and manipulate communal antagonisms in order to divide and weaken the working class.

In Ceylon the representatives of the BLPI, basing themselves, as I have already stated, on an internationalist program, voted against independence on the grounds that the agreement between the Ceylonese bourgeoisie and the imperialists did not achieve either national unification or independence from imperialism. Indeed, the principled stand of the Trotskyists was vindicated almost immediately. Among the first measures taken by the Ceylonese bourgeoisie was to enact a citizenship law which disenfranchised precisely that section of the population that had played a critical role in the struggle against British rule: the Tamil plantation workers. Citizenship was to be determined neither on the basis of birth, residence or work, but on the basis of family descent. This bill demonstrated that the bourgeoisie, by its own actions, was the principle obstacle to national unity.

A prophetic speech was given in opposition to the citizenship bill by Colvin R. de Silva:

"If there is any political philosophy underlying this bill, this is to say, if this bill is proceeding along certain assumptions, it is clear that the basic philosophical or political or sociological principle with which this government is unconsciously operating, is that the state must be coeval with the nation and nation with the race. There can be no other meaning and no other philosophy from which can flow the principle of descent as the primary principle for citizenship. This is an outmoded and exploded

philosophy... It is precisely in the present period with the breakdown of the capitalist system that, for purposes of serving reaction, this old and outmoded theory has been revived; and it was precisely under Fascism that the nation was sought to be made coeval with the race; and the race the governing factor in the composition of the state... The status of Ceylon's citizens thus runs into the danger of being reduced to the position of a racial status. And that too is a principle that needs to be fought."

The above passage was cited by Keerthi in a letter that he wrote to me in the autumn of 1987. He frequently referred to the early struggles of the BLPI because he drew both intellectual and political inspiration from its rich historical legacy. Though the RCL was the product of the struggle against the betrayal of that legacy by those who had once been the finest leaders of the Indian and Ceylonese proletariat, Keerthi could never turn his back on what was of enduring value in the contribution of men such as Colvin de Silva. If the issue of the BLPI's stand in 1948 was of such exceptional importance to Keerthi. It was because he considered the problem of the postwar settlement to be of fundamental importance in elaborating the strategy of the proletariat in the backward countries.

As Keerthi often stressed, the organic incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to contribute anything to the cause of historic progress found its most concentrated expression in the post-World War II deals through which a fraudulent "state independence" provided a cover for the continued domination of imperialism over the masses of the former colonies. Keerthi categorically rejected the essentially reformist and apologetic claims of the Pablo-Mandel opportunists that state independence represented some sort of partial gain for which the national bourgeoisie deserved at least some credit. In the early years of his political work, Keerthi assimilated the basic lessons of the International Committee's bitter struggle against the Pabloites' capitulation to Castro, Ben Bella and other representatives of bourgeois nationalism.

In retrospect, it hardly seems surprising that Keerthi clashed as far back as 1971 with the leadership of the Socialist Labour League. Given the political foundations upon which the RCL was based, he could not but have been acutely sensitive to the opportunist tendencies that became increasingly pronounced inside the SLL from the late 1960s on. In particular, on a whole series of decisive questions, Mike Banda—who was, along with Healy and Slaughter, part of the political trio that led the Socialist Labour League—developed positions of a distinctly opportunist character. First, in the late 1960s Banda began paying effusive tribute to Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, suggesting that their policies represented an alternative to Stalinism and even an original, albeit eclectic, application of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. Though Healy sought to avoid a political clash with Banda and dismissed his more extravagant declarations as nothing more than a personal eccentricity, the political reality was that the SLL was, like the Pabloites it had previously opposed, adapting itself to the politics of petty-bourgeois radicalism that was so widespread at the time.

Unchallenged within the leadership of the SLL, Banda's glorification of the potential of left bourgeois nationalism—of which Maoism and the politics of the NLF were different forms—developed into a far-ranging reassessment of the historic significance of the postwar settlement and the bourgeois national movements. Banda gradually developed the conception that the bourgeois states established in the former colonies represented genuine advances in the struggle for national self-determination and that the working class was obliged to give political support to these states.

Herein lay the essence of the dispute which arose in 1971-1972 between the RCL and the SLL. We will briefly review its background. In the summer of 1971 the bourgeois nationalist Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, achieved an electoral victory in East Pakistan, a territory inhabited by Bengali people and separated by thousands of miles from the rest of Pakistan. In response to the Awami League victory, the ruling military junta of Pakistan, headed by Yahya Kahn, invaded East

Pakistan. Kahn's army carried out bloody reprisals against the Bengali population. Over the late summer and autumn, however, a guerrilla movement known as the Mukti Bahini organized successful resistance. As the crisis of the Pakistani army intensified, the Indian government, fearing the establishment of a radical regime in East Bengal, intervened militarily. This came, not surprisingly, at the very time when the Indian government was engaged in the ferocious repression of the radical Naxalite movement in West Bengal.

Banda was jubilant. In a statement dated December 6, 1971, he wrote: "We critically support the decision of the Indian bourgeois government to give military and economic aid to Bangladesh."

The position adopted independently by the Revolutionary Communist League on December 8, 1971, was diametrically opposed to that of the SLL:

"We call upon the Indian proletariat to reject the claim of the Indian bourgeoisie to be the liberators of E. Bengal. The Trotskyists declare that the Indian armed intervention in E. Bengal had one and only one object. It was to prevent the struggle for Bangladesh from developing into a struggle for unification, on a revolutionary basis, of the whole of Bengal. The Indian armed intervention was designed to smash the revolutionary Bengali liberation struggle, to crush the upsurge of the masses in Bengal and to install a puppet regime which, fraudulently usurping the name of the government of Bangladesh, would confine and contain the mass movement in the interest of the bourgeoisie and imperialism. Thus we call upon the Indian proletariat too to take a position of revolutionary defeatism in relation to the counterrevolutionary war of the Indian bourgeoisie, while supporting by all and every means the struggle of the Mukti Bahini.

"This is the only revolutionary program for the proletariat in the Indian subcontinent. It flows logically and inexorably from a Marxist analysis of the whole postwar history of the subcontinent.

"What has been demonstrated during the last twenty-five years, ever since the fraudulent 'independence' granted by British imperialism to its loyal servants, the native bourgeoisie of these countries, is that none of the basic economic, national or social problems can be solved by those bourgeoisies. Their absolute bankruptcy in the face of these historical tasks is proof of the central thesis of the theory of permanent revolution of Trotsky that only the proletariat drawing behind it the downtrodden rural masses can solve these problems as part of the tasks of the socialist revolution. The carve-up of the Indian subcontinent, in conformity with the policy of divide-and-rule, supported by Hindu and Moslem bourgeoisies as well as by international Stalinism, was the framework within which the enormous social and national contradictions were suppressed and contained, ensuring the dominance of capitalism and starvation, famine and misery for the hundreds of millions of the oppressed masses. Those contradictions, developing as part and as a result of the development of the entire international imperialist system, can no longer be contained."

A letter written by Keerthi to Cliff Slaughter on December 16, 1971, flatly declared: "It is not possible to support the national liberation struggle of the Bengali people and the voluntary unification of India on socialist foundations without opposing the Indo-Pakistan war.... How can one even talk about unifying India without the struggle to overthrow the ruling classes of India and Pakistan, who are the main obstacle for such a unification?"

On January 11, 1972, in a further letter, Keerthi severely criticized Banda's enthusiastic endorsement of the successes of the Indian army and warned: "What lies behind this rhapsodizing about the Indian army is a clear rejection of the revolutionary capacities of the Bengali, Indian and Pakistani proletariat."

Mike Banda finally responded on January 27, 1972: "What did the war represent? Firstly it represented the attempts of the Pakistani bourgeoisie

with the complete support of US imperialism to suppress the Bangladesh people. But more important, through the creation of the refugee problem and the military occupation of E. Bengal, it developed into a definite threat against the already restricted home market of the Indian bourgeoisie on behalf of US imperialism....

"Almost overnight there was a dramatic change in the situation. The contradiction between the Indian working class and the Indian capitalists did not cease. No, but it was superseded by the conflict between the Indian nation and imperialism represented by Pakistan."

This was really astonishing: the conflict between classes, according to Banda, was subordinate to the struggle between the bourgeois states of India and Pakistan. This declaration represented a betrayal of the most essential principles of Marxism. There was no essential difference between Banda's position and that of the social-chauvinists who argued in 1914 that the contradiction between the working class and their bourgeoisie had been superseded by the conflict between the German (or French, Russian, British, etc.) nation against the imperialism of their national enemy.

Banda admonished Keerthi with words that have been hurled against Marxists many times: "Your attitude is too dogmatic and inflexible. It cannot therefore faithfully reflect the manysidedness and the contradictoriness of reality—and for that reason cannot find a way to the masses."

Finally, the letter from Banda ended on a rather pathetic note: "Please do not draw the conclusion from all this that we support the continued presence of Indian troops in Bangladesh or the disarming of the guerrillas by Rahman. We are and have been opposed to it."

Keerthi's criticism did not see the light of day, and the ICFI paid a heavy price. The WRP drifted steadily toward the right. More and more brazenly the WRP devoted itself to the task of defending and justifying the politics of the bourgeois nationalists, whether in Rhodesia, Iraq, Libya or Lebanon. At the same time, Banda became the most fervent champion of the supposed state-building achievements of the national bourgeoisie. This produced political results that were truly grotesque. In 1979 the Indonesian junta led by the butcher Suharto responded to the independence declaration of East Timor by dispatching troops and murdering tens of thousands. In opposition to the Socialist Labour League, the Australian section of the International Committee, which had defended the right of the inhabitants of East Timor to secede, Banda justified the repression of East Timor on the grounds that Suharto was defending the great conquest of the Indonesian national movement: the unity of the Indonesian archipelago.

Between 1978 and 1982 the WRP systematically betrayed the principles of Trotskyism as it subordinated the proletariat to bourgeois national movements such as the PLO and the Patriotic Front of Mugabe and Nkomo and bourgeois regimes such as those of Libya, Iran and Iraq.

The positions of the WRP mirrored those of the Pabloites, which found their most crass articulation in a speech given by Jack Barnes on December 31, 1982. He stated: "Permanent revolution is not a correct generalization, or an adequate one, or one that doesn't open up more problems than it solves, as to what our problem is.... We will get much, much more by reducing the permanent revolution, by pointing out, in my opinion, that it is not correct and not useful as a general term for our program.

What was Barnes's alternative? "We consider ourselves part of a common world Marxist movement with the FSLN, with the New Jewel Movement, with the Cuban Communist Party..."

The Barnes speech left no doubt in our minds about the trajectory of the WRP, and in our report to the ICFI on February 11, 1984, we devoted a substantial portion of our analysis to a criticism of Barnes's position. This, by the way, provoked a heated response from Banda, who declared angrily: "You start with Barnes and you end with the WRP." That was,

indeed, the case.

The RCL had not been invited to the plenum, and did not learn of my criticisms for another twenty-two months. But I have no doubt that if Keerthi had been present, he would have given this report his unequivocal and enthusiastic endorsement.

The fight within the ICFI had an objective significance: it anticipated the profound changes in the world situation that have brought about the collapse of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois nationalist movements that were so glorified by the opportunists.

Any objective evaluation of the postwar period demonstrates the manifest failure of bourgeois nationalism and the bogus character of the "independent states" that were created under its auspices.

Even in those countries where "national liberation" struggles were conducted by movements of an ostensibly communist character, the end result has been capitulation to imperialism. China is now developing entirely along capitalist lines, and Vietnam—which waged a thirty-year war against French and then American imperialism—has been reduced to advertising itself as the source of the cheapest labor in the world.

The split within the International Committee made possible an intensive reexamination of the entire historical significance of the movements of "national liberation" and their relation to the proletariat and the perspective of socialist revolution. I must state that between 1985 and 1987 Keerthi's evaluation of these national liberation movements became increasingly critical, especially as he examined the political development of the struggle between the Colombo regime and the Liberation Tigers in the North of Sri Lanka.

For the sake of the historical record, and in order to understand the evolution of the political line of the RCL, it is necessary to emphasize once again the really treacherous role played by the WRP inside the International Committee and its effect upon the Sri Lankan Trotskyists. Between 1972 and 1979, the WRP invoked the discipline of the ICFI to impose upon the RCL a political line in relation to the Tamil national movement with which Keerthi and his co-leaders were in sharp disagreement. That is, in keeping with Banda's view that the bourgeois states formed during the postwar period represented progressive historical phenomena, the WRP flatly opposed the struggle of the Tamil masses. Their opposition to the Tamil national movement was of a right-wing character, as it was based on a thoroughly reactionary defense of the legitimacy of the bourgeois states established after World War II. Later, in 1979, the WRP suddenly shifted its position on the Tamil question: it became an enthusiastic and uncritical supporter of the LTTE, adopting the same attitude it had to the PLO and other bourgeois national movements.

Only after the split did it become possible to reconsider the problems of the Tamil national movement within the framework of the rich historical experiences of the entire postwar period and a critical application of the theory of permanent revolution. As Keerthi said so many times, the WRP opportunists had "muddied the waters" and now the International Committee had to reassert the principles of Marxism in the elaboration of the strategy of world socialist revolution.

In opposition to all the opportunist tendencies in Sri Lanka, the RCL indefatigably defended the democratic rights of the Tamil people, upheld the right of the Tamils in the North to self-determination, and unequivocally opposed the reactionary and bloody war waged by the Sinhalese chauvinist regime in Colombo against the Tamils. However, within the context of the RCL's unyielding opposition to the Sinhalese chauvinists and their reactionary bourgeois state, Keerthi, in the closing months of his life, came more and more to the conclusion that the strategical tasks of the proletariat in the historically oppressed countries could not be properly defined simply on the basis of an uncritical invocation of the slogans of "national liberation" and "self-determination."

The signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord of early August 1987 exposed more than anything else the political bankruptcy of the LTTE,

and Keerthi responded to this development with a letter which laid the basis for a further development in the program of the International Committee.

He wrote to me on September 11, 1987: "The present situation demands particularly the summing up of the historical experience of the revolutionary proletariat in relation to national liberation movements, especially after the Second World War. To be sure we can draw a lot from the experiences analyzed by Lenin. But we have to keep in mind also the fact that when Lenin wrote his thesis for the Third International, the colonial peoples barely began their national struggle against imperialism.... But it cannot be used in an uncritical way to obscure the many changes which took place after the Second World War, particularly in the countries of the East. In the countries of the East too nationalism underwent a degeneration. Revisionism adapted to this degeneration, proclaiming the necessity to support the nationalism of the semicolonial bourgeoisie against imperialism. Banda was the spokesman for this tendency in the International Committee, at least from the early 1970s. The subordination of the working class to this nationalism by the Stalinists and the revisionists played a direct role in separating oppressed masses belonging to many small nationalities from the working class and paved the way for the development of national movements of the small nations for independence. Even though this striving for democratic freedom under the banner of nationalism directed against the capitalist state had a definite progressive content, nationalism proved incapable of either achieving national emancipation or uniting the forces necessary for the overthrow of the oppressor. And in fact at the decisive moment it came forward as a barrier to unify the working class, which alone is capable of leading all the forces of the democratic revolution."

The last meeting of the International Committee in Keerthi's lifetime took place in November 1987, and it issued a statement which counterposed to the bourgeois program of Tamil national separatism the perspective of a Unified Socialist States of Tamil Eelam and Sri Lanka.

Now, five years after Keerthi's death, it is necessary to complete the work of drawing up a balance sheet of the postwar period and evaluating the entire experience of bourgeois national liberation movements.

While defending the democratic rights of all oppressed peoples, it is the obligation of Marxists to expose how the slogans of "national liberation" and "self-determination" have, in practice, been transformed by the bourgeois nationalists into reactionary justifications for separatist and communalist programs that are without any genuine democratic or progressive social content.

To the extent that Marxists attributed a progressive content to national liberation movements, it was because they were in some way identified with overcoming imperialist domination and the legacy of backwardness, tribal and caste distinctions. etc. "India" and "China" were not ethnically nor linguistically unified nations, but political concepts which implied the progressive unification of peoples across a vast territorial domain, opening up the prospects for genuine economic and cultural progress.

That content is hardly to be found in any of the movements which presently claim to champion "national liberation." At any rate, whatever the subjective aims of different movements, the liberation of mankind cannot be advanced in this era of global economic integration by establishing new national states. The creation of special territorial enclaves for every segment of the population that claims a distinct national, linguistic, religious, or ethnic identities is a perspective whose realization would signify a descent to barbarism.

Trotsky argued very clearly on this question: Even in his lifetime, when the demand for self-determination still retained a progressive content, it did not stand above the struggle to establish the unity of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. The demand for self-determination did not then, nor does it now, signify the reconciliation of Marxism and nationalism. Above all, it does not oblige the Marxist party to give support

of any kind to separatist movements. The writings of Trotsky on the question of Catalan self-determination, for example, are very instructive in this regard.

In drawing these quite extended remarks to a conclusion, permit me to explain, as the chairman did in his introduction, that I chose the format of a lecture because I believe that an appreciation of the significance of Keerthi's work is possible only on the basis of a historical review of the theoretical traditions of revolutionary internationalism upon which his intellectual and political work was based.



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