

Dulal Bose, 1918-2001

Veteran Indian Trotskyist dies in Calcutta, aged 82

Nanda Wickramasinghe
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Veteran Trotskyist Dulal Bose died in Calcutta on March 21 at the age of 82. He joined the Trotskyist movement in 1939 as a young man, fought tenaciously for its program in the Indian working class and remained committed to its principles throughout his entire adult life. In 1991, he joined the Socialist Labour League in India, which is in solidarity with the International Committee of the Fourth International, and devoted the last decade of his life to translating the works of Leon Trotsky into Bengali.

Dulal Bose was born in Calcutta on September 10, 1918. His father died when Dulal was young and he was brought up by his uncle. An intelligent and talented young man, he studied for a bachelor of honors degree in English but never finished the course. Like many of his generation he was drawn into politics by momentous events—the Russian Revolution, which occurred in the year before he was born, a growing mass movement against British colonial rule and the imminent Second World War.

What distinguished Dulal, however, was an understanding that the working class was the sole force capable of resolving the immense problems confronting the Indian masses. He was hostile to the Indian National Congress led by Gandhi and Nehru, which had accepted ministerial office under the British. Dulal was particularly affected when the Congress administration shot down striking workers in Kanpur, Bombay and Madras, and put down peasant struggles in 1938. He also distrusted the Communist Party of India, which took its line from the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, and called for unity with Gandhi and the Congress despite the repression.

In the midst of this political turmoil, it was Leon Trotsky's *Open Letter to the Workers of India* that clarified for Dulal the political orientation that had to be fought for. Written in July, 1939 on the eve of World War II, the letter subjected the policies of the Communist International or Comintern, which argued that the Indian working class had to subordinate itself to the British in the interests of fighting fascism, to a withering critique.

After exposing the utter incapacity of Congress to wage a revolutionary struggle, Trotsky tore apart the arguments of the Stalinists. According to the Comintern, he wrote, in the event of a war over colonies, “the Indian people must support their present slaveowners, the British imperialists. That is to say, they must shed their blood not for their own emancipation, but for the preservation of the rule of ‘the City’ [the financial centre of London] over India. And these cheaply-to-be-bought scoundrels dare to quote Marx and Lenin!” In the case of war, the Indian working class, Trotsky explained, had to fight for its own class interests independently of the

British, Congress and the Stalinists and for that a revolutionary party was needed.

Dulal responded to this appeal and joined the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL) formed in Bengal in 1939 to fight for Trotsky's perspective. The RSL merged with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in Ceylon [now Sri Lanka] and other Trotskyist organisations on the Indian subcontinent to form the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), which became a section of the Fourth International in 1942.

Dulal was present at the BLPI's founding congress and was a member of its Bengal regional committee. He devoted himself to work full-time for the new party and played a leading role in its struggle during and immediately after World War II.

Working under conditions of illegality, Dulal and his comrades succeeded in establishing the authority of the BLPI among a considerable section of the working class of Calcutta. The party produced an English-language journal, the *Permanent Revolution*, the newspaper *Spark* in English and a Bengali paper *Inquilab* (Revolution), which had over 2,000 regular subscribers and was circulated widely.

The BLPI not only had to counter the dangers of arrest by the police but also the threat of Stalinist informers who had no compunction in providing the British colonial authorities with information about the activity of Trotskyists. Throughout this period, the BLPI sheltered leading Trotskyists from Ceylon who had escaped from jail after being imprisoned for opposing the war.

The immediate aftermath of the war witnessed an upsurge in the struggles of the Indian working class. The BLPI won the leadership of a number of trade unions. In Bengal, it led the paper workers', match workers' and fire fighters' unions. Dulal became secretary of the Titagarh paper workers' union and the Calcutta match workers' union. He also played a prominent role in organising anti-British protests among students and workers, and in doing so won a reputation as an effective speaker and dynamic figure.

In 1946, a mutiny by British naval ratings broke out in Bombay over the decision to send them to Indonesia to back Dutch military forces seeking to crush the anti-colonial movement. The BLPI leadership decided to send Dulal to Bombay where he organised medical students to distribute leaflets supporting the mutiny to major factories in the city.

The emergence of Pabloism

Faced with mounting opposition to colonial rule, the British, with the backing of Congress and the Communist Party, set about organising a transfer of power to the Indian bourgeoisie based on the partition of the subcontinent along religious lines into India and Pakistan. The granting of independence in August 1947 set off a communal bloodbath that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. Bengal itself was divided and Dulal was sent to what became East Pakistan and later Bangladesh to politically guide the work of BLPI members there.

In a famous speech at Ulubaria near Calcutta following the assassination of Gandhi in early 1948, BLPI leader Colvin R de Silva explained the fraudulent character of the independence that had been granted by the British. “What has taken place is not a transition to independence but a switch over by imperialism from direct to indirect forms of rule via a realignment of its alliance with the Indian bourgeoisie... British imperialism has not abdicated but only retired to the background, leaving its Indian partner solely in charge of the business...”

Dulal was at the meeting and later recalled the prophetic character of the remarks that de Silva had made about the “poor Trotskyists” who thought that “independence” had brought about a fundamental change. Within the ranks of the Fourth International, an opportunist trend was emerging in the Indian subcontinent and internationally, headed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. They were abandoning the struggle for the political independence of the working class and argued that the Trotskyist movement in each country had to adapt itself to the existing Social Democratic, Stalinist and bourgeois national leaderships.

This opportunist trend had a devastating political impact on the Trotskyist movement in the Indian subcontinent. Pablo pushed for the break-up of the BLPI along national lines and the entry of its members in India into the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), a petty bourgeois radical organisation. In Sri Lanka, notwithstanding his earlier words, Colvin R de Silva and the BLPI unified with those “poor Trotskyists” who had accepted independence as a genuine advance and had re-established a separate LSSP.

These decisions created enormous political confusion in the BLPI. Dulal and the majority of the BLPI members in Bengal opposed the decision to break up the party and dissolve its Indian section into the CSP. But unable to identify the political roots of the opportunist orientation, they carried out the decision. Dulal, who could not accept having to work within the CSP, left politics and Calcutta in 1949. He returned to the city in 1951 and began collaborating with his former colleagues in publishing *Inquilab*. But in 1954, the group joined the Communist League, which was affiliated with the Pabloites, and he again withdrew from political life.

Cut off from the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), formed in 1953 to fight the opportunist trend, Dulal was not able to resolve the political issues thrown up by the emergence of Pabloism. What is significant, however, is that when he did finally meet representatives of the ICFI, decades later in 1991, he quickly came to agree with its analysis. His life reflected not only the considerable political difficulties confronting the Trotskyist movement in the post-war period but the deep roots that it had put down in the Indian working class.

When he first met with a member of the SLL from Madras, he complained rather wearily, at the age of 72, “We are old bones. You

young people must carry on.” But as the discussions proceeded it became clear that there was considerable life left in those “old bones.” Dulal wanted to know the ICFI’s attitude to the crisis of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He was particularly drawn to its analysis of Pabloism that had had such a devastating impact on his political life. He enthusiastically read David North’s *The Heritage We Defend*, which sums up the protracted struggle of the Trotskyist movement against opportunism, and in 1993 made the difficult train trip of well over a thousand kilometres from Calcutta to Madras to meet the author.

Joining the ICFI breathed new life back into Dulal. Despite his advanced age, he was determined to use his considerable knowledge and skills to benefit the Trotskyist movement by translating its works into Bengali. He produced translations of David North’s *The Heritage We Defend* and the *End of the USSR* and the ICFI statement *Oppose Imperialist War and Colonialism*, as well as Leon Trotsky’s *I Stake My Life* and *In Defense of the October Revolution*. He also translated a number of *World Socialist Web Site* articles into Bengali and contributed to the SLL’s Bengali language paper. At the time of his death, he was working on a translation of Trotsky’s classic *The Revolution Betrayed*.

As this writer can testify, Dulal was a remarkable individual. Cultured, systematic and thoroughly versed in the works of Trotsky, he could quote passages with great accuracy on the spur of the moment. When he spoke in meetings one was given a glimpse of his abilities as a public speaker. He retained from his early years in the Trotskyist movement the mannerisms of an orator capable of explaining complex political issues to a large audience of workers. He always showed great warmth and hospitality towards visiting comrades as did his wife and children. Their home in Calcutta became a venue for political meetings and discussion.

What animated Dulal right up to his death was the conviction that the future for the working class and mankind as a whole lay in the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialism. Despite a gap of nearly 40 years in his active political involvement, he has made an indelible contribution to the struggle to build the Trotskyist movement throughout the Indian subcontinent and internationally. His work will live on in the translations that he so tirelessly laboured to complete before his death. The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and the Socialist Labour League in India send their deepest condolences to his wife and children.



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