

Hundreds attend funeral of Sri Lankan Trotskyist

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More than 300 party members, supporters, friends and relatives—Tamil and Sinhalese alike—participated in the funeral of leading Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member Sabaratnam Rasendran at the public cemetery in Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia, a suburb of Colombo, on March 3.

Rasendran was a member of the Colombo editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and an SEP Central Committee member. He died at the Chest Hospital in Welisara, Sri Lanka, of pneumonia and lung abscess septicemia on February 27 at the age of 54. He joined the Trotskyist movement in 1973 as a university student and fought for its perspective with courage and determination throughout his adult life.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias read out some of the many condolence messages from members and leaders of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), including WSWs chairman David North, expressing their sorrow at Rasendran's untimely death and their respect for his principled struggle for the liberation of the working class.

In paying tribute to Rasendran's three decades in the Trotskyist movement, Dias pointed to the political difficulties of the early 1970s, during which Rasendran, a young Tamil student, joined the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner to the SEP. Class struggles were erupting in many countries around the world fuelled by the beginnings of the break-up of the postwar economic order. But these struggles lacked a revolutionary socialist perspective and were dominated by Stalinist, Social Democratic or petty bourgeois movements based on Maoism and Castroism.

In Sri Lanka, Dias explained, the betrayal of Trotskyist principles by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which entered a bourgeois government headed by Madame Bandaranaike in 1964, gave rise to communal tendencies—in the south, the rise of the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and in the north, the

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) espousing a separate Tamil state.

"Rasendran refused to react to the grave crisis by adopting pragmatic solutions. Instead he engaged himself in probing the historical root causes of this crisis to find a way out," Dias said. He was drawn to the scientific approach of Marxism, studied the programs of different socialist tendencies and came to the conclusion that Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution provided the key to solving the problems facing the oppressed masses and minority nationalities such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka. It was on this basis that Rasendran joined the RCL.

"In the present situation, when the clouds of a third imperialist war are beginning to gather and the Indian subcontinent is ravaged by communal conflicts, the historical validity of the perspective for which Rasendran fought has become ever more clear," the SEP general secretary said.

"Rasendran saw the rise and fall of the so-called big movements—the LSSP, the Stalinist Communist Party and nationalist groups during the last three decades. He saw how the JVP, which started by proclaiming to be an alternative socialist movement to the treacherous old leaderships, degenerated into a fascistic movement during the 1987-89 period.

"During the same period he saw how those Tamil groups, including the LTTE, which claimed to be fighting for the liberation of Tamils connived with both the Indian and Sri Lanka regimes to bring Indian troops to the North and East of the island under the Indo-Sri Lanka accord. And also how these Tamil parties backed the Peoples Alliance and Chandrika Kumaratunga to come to power in 1994 and similarly helped the present regime during the last elections. The policies of all these nationalist parties, whether Sinhala or Tamil, have brought only destruction and intolerable suffering to working people irrespective of their nationality."

Dias said Rasendran's conviction in the correctness of the Trotskyist perspective of unifying Sinhala and Tamil workers on the basis of a socialist program had only been strengthened by these experiences. Despite his illness, he had played a crucial role in preparing articles for the *World Socialist Web Site* and translating material for the Tamil language website. Even in hospital he continued to follow political developments and was optimistic that he would be able to continue his work.

SEP Central Committee member M. Aravinthan also paid tribute to Rasendran's personal qualities and his commitment to principle. Hundreds of copies of the SEP's obituary to Rasendran, published on the WSWS, were distributed in Sinhala, Tamil and English. Those present were keen to understand what had motivated Rasendran to become a Trotskyist and the role that he had played.

Rasendran's political work had a significant impact on many people from different walks of life and parts of the country. In the five days between his death and the funeral, nearly a thousand people came to his home to personally express their condolences to his wife and their children.

Several hundred mourners took part in the funeral procession, walking the one kilometre to the cemetery behind the hearse carrying Rasendran's body. A party comrade carried a red flag at the front and the *Internationale* was played throughout the march. Many onlookers and passing vehicles stopped to watch the procession with great interest and curiosity.

In attendance at the funeral were not only mourners from Colombo, but workers and young people from plantations in the central hill areas such as Hatton, Bandarawela, Badulla, as well as from remote villages such as Tangalla in the south and Udappuwa in the northwest. One SEP sympathiser made the difficult journey from Vavuniya, which borders the war-torn northern province. Well-known Sri Lankan film director Dharmasiri Bandaranayaka came to pay his last respects.

SEP members in the northern city of Jaffna, who had a close relationship with Rasendran for decades, attempted to travel to Colombo but were prevented from doing so by transport restrictions.

Two young Tamils from the plantation areas, Ponniah Sarawanakumar and Arunasalam Logeswaran, who were detained without trial for more than three years, heard of Rasendran's death in prison. They were finally released this week as a result of the SEP's campaign on their behalf and immediately sent their condolences to the party

and his family.

Many of those at the funeral not only expressed sorrow at Rasendran's death but commented on his self-sacrifice and firmness. A former coworker at the Inland Revenue Department commented: "Rasendran was well known for his political views. From the very beginning he opposed the trade union bureaucracy and explained issues of political program to the members."

Many signed the condolence book. "The memory of Rasendran, who dedicated his whole life to the revolutionary cause as an international Trotskyist, will enlighten the coming struggles and give great inspiration," one worker wrote. "In Mr. Rasendran we had a man with infinite patience, unlimited compassion, firm and resolute in all his stands, dedication to the committed cause and above all that much coveted characteristic—humanitarianism towards all," a neighbour commented. "Uncle Rasendran was one of the most gentle and compassionate men I have seen. He was very firm and steadfast in his beliefs," a young person wrote.

Though Rasendran's family came from a Hindu background, there were no religious rituals. The SEP thanked his family, especially his wife Janaki, for their cooperation in organising the funeral. A Hindu tradition insists that the wife of a dead man and other women do not go to the cemetery, but Janaki nevertheless took part. She told a party member: "I am coming to the cemetery. I am fully convinced of the correctness of the policies that Rasendran fought for."

Rasendran was well known in Sri Lanka. The two main Tamil daily newspapers, *Virakasari* and *Thinakkural*, and a popular Tamil radio station, *Surian FM*, announced Rasendran's death. As well as noting his party affiliation and skills as a journalist and translator, the reports quoted from SEP General Secretary Dias saying that Rasendran's death would be an immense loss to the international working class and the world Trotskyist movement. *Thinakkural* and *Surian* added their own tribute to Rasendran as a Trotskyist fighter dedicated to developing the political consciousness of the working class.



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