

Sabaratnam Rasendran 1947—2002

Veteran Sri Lankan Trotskyist dies in Colombo

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

2 March 2002

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) announces the death of comrade Sabaratnam Rasendran with profound sorrow. Rasendran died at the Chest Hospital in Welisara, Sri Lanka, of pneumonia and lung abscess septicemia at 4am on February 27. He was a member of the Colombo editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Central Committee of the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). He is survived by his wife, two daughters and a son.

Rasendran's untimely death at the age of 54 is a tragic loss for the Trotskyist movement. It has occurred at a time when his services to the party and the *World Socialist Web Site* were becoming more vital than ever before. He joined the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner to the SEP, as a young man and fought for its principles with courage and determination for nearly 30 years.

Rasendran was born on October 13, 1947 on Nainathiv Island, part of the Jaffna Peninsula in the north of Sri Lanka. He had one brother and one sister. Like many Jaffna Tamils, his parents were deeply concerned that their children receive a good education. Rasendran was schooled at the Ganesha Vidyalaya and Nainathiv Central College then moved to Colombo to study for a degree in economics.

In 1972, he came into contact with RCL members at the University of Colombo where he joined the party's youth organisation, the Young Socialists. This was a difficult period for the Trotskyist movement in Sri Lanka. Less than a decade before, in 1964, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) had openly abandoned the fundamental principles of Marxism and entered a bourgeois government headed by the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP).

The LSSP's abject betrayal had profound consequences for the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. Its rejection of the political struggle to unify Sinhala and Tamil workers around the program of socialist internationalism led directly to the emergence of petty bourgeois radical movements based on communal politics. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), based on a mixture of Castroism, Maoism and Sinhala chauvinism, emerged in the south among disaffected Sinhalese rural youth. In the north and east, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) attracted alienated Tamil youth who saw in its demand for a separate Tamil state a means of fighting the endemic discrimination suffered by the Tamil minority.

In 1970, the LSSP, which had been for decades identified by broad masses as Marxist and Trotskyist, entered a second SLFP government. It was part of the cabinet that brutally crushed a JVP rebellion in 1971 and then drew up a new constitution that entrenched anti-Tamil discrimination by making Sinhala the only state language and Buddhism the state religion. To many young people, who were radicalised in this period and did not think deeply about the issues, it appeared that "Trotskyism," in the form of the LSSP, had failed and the only alternative to solve their

immediate problems was to join the JVP or the LTTE.

In these circumstances, the RCL, formed in 1968, sought to clarify all of the complex political issues of the LSSP's betrayal, at the heart of which lay its increasing abandonment of socialist internationalism and adaptation to Sinhala chauvinism. In 1972, when Rasendran first came into the contact with the party, the RCL had just emerged from the illegality imposed by the SLFP-LSSP government in the wake of the JVP uprising. Following the ICFI Congress in that year, the RCL General Secretary Keerthi Balasuriya began a series of lectures on the ICFI, which Rasendran attended along with other students.

When Rasendran joined the RCL in 1973, he consciously rejected Tamil separatism, convinced that the oppression of Tamils could only be ended as a consequence of the fight to unite Sinhala and Tamil workers in the struggle for socialism. It was not an easy decision. Tamil nationalism and the LTTE were on the rise. Following the LSSP's betrayal, pessimism in the revolutionary role of the working class was prevalent. There was no shortage of radical demagogues who were preaching various opportunist shortcuts and hailing the virtues of Mao, Guevara and Ho Chi Minh.

Today it is obvious to many that the LTTE, as it prepares for talks with the Colombo government, has led Tamils into a dangerous dead-end. But in the early 1970s, Rasendran was one of very few Tamil youth who clearly understood the bankruptcy of its nationalist perspective, which, at the time, was suitably decorated with socialist phraseology. One of his relatives, who met him in Colombo in 1974, recently recalled: "He was from a well-off family. Moreover his father was a supporter of Federal Party [a bourgeois Tamil party]. But I was surprised when Rasendran talked otherwise and began arguing for the Trotskyist program. Later I also joined the RCL."

Rasendran did not waver in his conviction that socialist internationalism, not Tamil nationalism, was the answer to the oppression of Tamils. He, like others, had to bear systematic discrimination. A consequence of the Sinhala-only policy was that he, as a public servant, had to learn the Sinhalese language, just to qualify for his job. His home was frequently subjected to searches by police or soldiers as part of the broader harassment of Tamils. He had to register visiting relatives from the north and east at the police station. There was no end to the list of petty humiliations and outright racism. Yet while he was understandably angry, Rasendran never blamed "the Sinhalese" as a whole, because he understood that full responsibility rested with the Sri Lankan ruling elite that deliberately inflamed communal tensions to divide the working class.

From the time he joined the RCL, Rasendran displayed considerable dedication to his political work. He was afflicted from a young age with a nervous ailment that led to epilepsy. As those who worked with him closely used to point out, high levels of stress made his epileptic fits more likely. Nevertheless he undertook the responsibility of translating all the

important ICFI documents and articles for the party's Tamil language newspaper, *Tholilalar Pathai* (Workers Path) and invariably met his deadlines.

Between 1973 and 1982, Rasendran worked in Colombo at the Department of Inland Revenue. He joined the RCL group in the Government Clerical Services Union (GCSU) which was in sharp struggle against the politics of the LSSP, which controlled the union. When Inland Revenue became a closed department separated from the public service as a whole, he joined the Sri Lanka Tax Officers Union and repeatedly clashed with its conservative leadership who advocated "no politics in the union." He was a union committee member from 1986 to 1991.

In 1978, Rasendran married and he and his wife transferred to Jaffna in 1982. The conservative United National Party (UNP) had come to power in 1977 and intensified its anti-Tamil attacks as a means to divide workers and ram through its free market policies. Rasendran provided political leadership for an important group of RCL members in the area in what proved to be a decisive time.

The UNP-inspired provocations against Tamils led to a reaction among Tamil youth, many of whom flocked to the LTTE and other separatist organisations. Militant protests and armed rebellion escalated. Then in 1983, after the LTTE killed 13 soldiers in Jaffna, Sinhala chauvinists in the south launched a preplanned pogrom against Tamils that marked the beginning of the country's ongoing civil war.

This was a crucial period in Rasendran's political work. He had to fight against Tamil nationalism while at the same time vigorously opposing all forms of state repression. Jaffna was under the control of the army, which prevented any political literature from Colombo entering the north. For nearly two years, political work, including the printing and distribution of party documents, had to be done virtually underground. In the heat of events in 1983, Rasendran translated the RCL statement, "Tamil Struggled Betrayed," which had been smuggled into Jaffna, and arranged for its printing and distribution. The document was crucial in analysing the 1983 pogrom and the politically criminal role played by the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka.

In the same period, Rasendran gave political guidance to the party's struggles in several larger factories where the RCL had longstanding members. It was necessary to combat a tendency among workers, actively encouraged by the union leaders, to retreat into limited trade union action over immediate economic demands divorced from any broader political struggle for the democratic rights of Tamils. At the Cey-nor factory and Paranthan Chemical factory, the RCL members had to confront the Ceylon Mercantile Union headed by Bala Tampoe, a former LSSP leader, who broke with the LSSP over its betrayal, but only so he could pursue his own particular brand of centrist and syndicalist politics.

Rasendran returned to Colombo in 1986—a crucial year for the Trotskyist movement. In a political struggle to defend the principles of socialist internationalism, the ICFI expelled the longstanding leadership of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). The split with the WRP and the subsequent clarification of political perspective gave Rasendran new strength despite his failing health. He threw himself into the task of translating key party documents, which he understood were vital for the training of a new generation of Trotskyists.

But it was also a very difficult period for the RCL. In 1987, the party suffered an immense loss when its founding general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya died of a heart attack. In the immediate aftermath of this blow, the RCL faced the joint dangers of state repression and fascist attacks by the JVP, which was physically eliminating anyone who opposed its chauvinist campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord. Three RCL members were killed by JVP thugs for refusing to bow to its dictates. At considerable risk, Rasendran put his home at the disposal of the party—for important meetings and to shelter party members. It must be said that during this period his wife Janaki was a source of great encouragement

and support.

Rasendran retired prematurely in 1991 when he found that his health problems made it impossible to carry out both his government job and party responsibilities. After his retirement he worked tirelessly for the party as an unpaid full-time member of staff. Following the establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site*, he played a key role in coordinating the translation of articles for the Tamil section of the website. Fluent in three languages—Tamil, Sinhala and English—he was meticulous in making sure translations properly conveyed the political ideas of the original. Among the works that he translated in the recent past are: *The Transitional Program* of the Fourth International and David North's *What is happening in the USSR, Whither the Soviet Union* and *End of the Soviet Union*, as well as Keerthi Balasuriya's *History of the Sama Samaja Party*.

He was anxious about his health because it limited his work. But he rarely mentioned the topic and others had to insist that he looked after himself. For the six months before his death, he had been grappling with deteriorating health, before recently being hospitalised.

Party members and friends have been quick to recall his politeness, hospitality and breadth of knowledge. If one inquired about any Tamil leader, Rasendran could provide, on the spot, not only a detailed biography but frequently a pithy summary of the character of the man using the colloquial vernacular. "He has no backbone but has a big mouth to brag about it," he used to comment about former Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) leader Amirthalingam.

Rasendran loved music, Indian dance and literature. He had won a gold medal and other awards between 1968 and 1970 for his short stories, but was unable to proceed with his literary work. He wanted his daughters to learn Indian music and dance, not because it was a tradition among Tamils but because, as he said, such things would develop sensitivity, knowledge and deep emotional reserves. He broke with tradition at his eldest daughter's first show of Bhartha Natyam (Indian classical dance), by inviting a Marxist, the SEP General Secretary Wije Dias, as the "distinguished person" to address the audience.

His party comrades remember Rasendran as quiet and steadfast. When a political argument initially began, he would generally keep silent. But if matters continued and heated up, he would suddenly break onto the scene to powerfully make the points he considered correct or principled—and he would not easily give way.

A few days before his death, Rasendran told comrades at his hospital bed: "I am getting better and will be able to work for the WSWs." He told others: "I am bearing all this pain and surviving because I am a Marxist and I am confident of the victory of our perspective." Full of optimism in the perspectives of the movement he repeatedly affirmed that he was looking forward to getting back to the work that had been interrupted by his illness.

Rasendran's political record over the last three decades is an object lesson for others in the struggle for socialist internationalism against all forms of nationalism. The SEP pays tribute to his memory.



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