

# SEP in Sri Lanka commemorates 15th anniversary of Keerthi Balasuriya's death

Our reporter  
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The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) held a well-attended public meeting in Colombo on December 21 to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the death of Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding general secretary of the SEP's forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL). His untimely death on December 18, 1987 from a heart attack at the age of just 39 was a tragic loss to the international Trotskyist movement.

Workers, youth and students—both Sinhala and Tamil—travelled from many parts of the island to attend the meeting, which was addressed by SEP General Secretary Wije Dias and chaired by Vilani Peiris, Keerthi's life-long companion and an SEP Central Committee member. The two other speakers were Central Committee member, Nanda Wickramasinghe and Aravindan who spoke in Tamil.

Peiris said that the SEP had organised the meeting to commemorate the 15th anniversary of Keerthi's death in order to explain the relevance of his political work for workers and young people today. She explained that he had been an outstanding representative of Trotskyism in the post-war period who had a broad knowledge of Marxist theory and history. As a young man, he had come to read Leon Trotsky through a love of art but rapidly immersed himself in Trotsky's political writings and became convinced of the correctness of the Fourth International's program.

Even in difficult circumstances, Peiris said, Keerthi did not waver in his convictions. She described the trying conditions of the early 1970s, when the newly established RCL faced state repression, and, at the same time, was being politically undermined by the long-standing British leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

"Keerthi never lost faith in Trotskyism," she said. He was confident that the difficult conditions would, even if of long duration, ultimately change as the contradictions of world capitalism matured and compelled workers to find a way out. Keerthi insisted that only Trotskyism could provide the political program for the socialist emancipation of mankind.

Wije Dias, who delivered the main report to the meeting, explained that the crucial experience in Keerthi's political development had been the entry of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) into the government of Mme Bandaranaike in 1964. The LSSP's decision to join a capitalist government represented a complete betrayal of the program and principles of Trotskyism, which it had previously defended, and was hotly debated among young people at the time.

Those who opposed the LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government broke away and formed the LSSP (Revolutionary) but it provided no way forward. "During this period of political confusion and turmoil, a layer of young people, who were inspired by the LSSP's earlier principled positions but frustrated with LSSP-R's policies, left to form the Shakthi (Strength) group to revive Trotskyism. Less than 10 months later, its centrist nature was revealed when a majority re-joined the LSSP.

"What was one to make of this second or third betrayal of Trotskyism? Why had it happened? How could this political predicament be overcome? These were the questions raised in the minds of all of us who remained,

including Keerthi. We were adamant that we had to find convincing answers," Dias said.

"It was during this critical period that the ICFI took the decisive step of intervening in Sri Lanka. Tony Banda, a leading member of the British Socialist Labour League (SLL) visited the island at the end of 1966 to build a group independent of the LSSP-R. His visit followed the crucial intervention made by the SLL's secretary Gerry Healy who came to Sri Lanka and opposed the LSSP's decision at its 1964 conference to join the Bandaranaike government."

Through Banda, Dias said, "those of us who had refused to rejoin LSSP came into contact with the long-standing Trotskyist Wilfred Pereira, comrade Spike, who had opposed the policies of the LSSP and also the LSSP-R." The group carefully studied Healy's pamphlet, *The Great Betrayal*, which explained that the roots of the LSSP's betrayal lay not in Colombo but in Paris. By that, Healy meant that the chief political responsibility for the LSSP's degeneration rested with the opportunist politics of its mentors in the United Secretariat of the Fourth International (USec) based in France.

"Keerthi began an intense study of the ICFI's struggle against the opportunist trend represented by USec. He was the most regular visitor to comrade Spike's library and spent long hours engrossed in the ICFI's documents that dealt with the development of a revisionist current led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel within the Fourth International following World War II."

Dias explained that Pabloite revisionism was an impressionist response to the apparent strength of world imperialism and the Stalinist bureaucracies following the post-war restabilisation of capitalism in the late 1940s. Having lost all confidence in the revolutionary capacity of the working class, the Pabloites adapted themselves, in the name of "integrating into the real movement of the masses," to the reactionary forces dominating the workers movement in each country—to Stalinism, reformism and in the semi-colonial countries, various bourgeois nationalist leaderships. The ICFI was established in 1953 to defend the program and principles of the Trotskyist movement.

"Keerthi drew far-reaching lessons from his study of the ICFI's documents and imparted them to all of us. He became thoroughly convinced that a revolutionary path for the working class could not be found without basing oneself on the historical lessons derived from the struggle of Marxists to build an international revolutionary movement of the working class."

Dias said that the LSSP's portrayal of the ideas of the Bandaranaikes in radical and even revolutionary colours had its theoretical and political origins in Pabloite revisionism, which promoted Castro's Cuba along with the Stalinist bureaucracies in Moscow and Beijing as roads to socialism. He explained that Keerthi's study of the ICFI's documents enabled him to differentiate the RCL, which was formed as a section of the ICFI in 1968, from a series of petty bourgeois youth movements that emerged in Sri Lanka following the LSSP's betrayal, basing themselves on Castro,

Che Guevara, Mao or even North Korea's Kim Il Sung. All of them were permeated with nationalism and racism.

"Drawing on the lessons of the ICFI's struggle against revisionism, Keerthi subjected the politics of all these groups, particularly of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), to a withering criticism from the standpoint of socialist internationalism. His critique of the Naxalite movement in India was published in the *News Letter*, the organ of the British SLL."

Dias explained that Keerthi's intense theoretical work enabled the RCL to withstand the impact of the political degeneration of the British SLL, when in the early 1970s it began to accommodate to the same pressures to which the Pabloites had been adapting. In 1971, Keerthi wrote to the SLL objecting to a statement, put out without consultation in the ICFI's name, supporting the Indian army's intervention into the national liberation struggle in East Bengal against Pakistani rule.

In a letter to the ICFI's secretary Cliff Slaughter, Keerthi wrote: "India's war against Pakistan is not a liberation war... 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. Without opposing the war from within India and Pakistan it is completely absurd to talk about a unified socialist India which alone can safeguard the right of self-determination of the many nations in the Indian subcontinent."

Dias noted that, in contrast to the statement produced by the SLL, the RCL had explained that the historic roots of the conflict in East Pakistan lay in the 1948 partition of the Indian subcontinent along communal lines. The party called on workers to reject India's claim to be "the liberators of East Bengal" and warned that the Indian army had intervened to suppress the struggles of the Bengali people. It pointed out that the solution to the crisis lay in the unification of the working class in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to put an end to capitalist rule and the imperialist carve-up of the region.

However, the RCL was forced to withdraw its statement. Keerthi wrote in his letter to Slaughter: "We believe that our defending the IC statement would create immense confusion inside the working class. It need not be stated that it is difficult to defend the IC statement. Nevertheless clarity inside the international is more important than anything else, for it is impossible for us to build a national section without fighting to build the international."

Dias explained that the SLL leadership did not even inform other sections of the ICFI of the serious political differences raised by the RCL let alone organise an international discussion. Over the next decade, the opportunist degeneration of the SLL, later established as the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), was to have an even greater destructive impact on the RCL's work in Sri Lanka and on the Indian subcontinent.

"In 1972, the SLL vehemently opposed the RCL's defence of the democratic rights of the oppressed Tamil minority. This was under conditions in which the Bandaranaike coalition government was adopting a racist constitution to divide the working class on communal lines and heighten anti-Tamil discrimination. As a result petty bourgeois radical movements based on communalism were also emerging both among Sinhala and Tamil youth and rural poor.

"In the four years prior to 1972, the RCL had waged a consistent struggle to counter these pernicious developments in the South as well as in the North by rallying the petty-bourgeois masses around the working class in the fight for a socialist republic. Keerthi's pamphlet, *The Politics and Class Nature of the JVP*, published in 1970, had played an important role in exposing the JVP's racist, petty-bourgeois character among Sinhala youth. The RCL's struggle among Tamils had also attracted considerable support. But the party's standing was severely hampered by the SLL's political positions."

It was not until the split with the WRP in 1985-86 that the RCL and the

ICFI could clarify its revolutionary perspective based on Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. Dias quoted from the ICFI's statement published in November 1987 on the Indo-Lanka Accord and the Indian army's intervention into northern Sri Lanka—the last document on which Keerthi worked before his death.

"The betrayals of the LSSP notwithstanding, the sole perspective which offers a way out of the blind ally of bourgeois nationalism is one based on the unified struggle of the Tamil and Sri Lankan working class. The Indian occupation, which has exposed the class basis of the oppression of the Tamil nation as well as the Sinhala masses in the south, raises anew the imperative of combining the national struggle with the class struggle, under the hegemony of the Sinhala and Tamil working class. Concretely, this means raising the banner of the united socialist states of Eelam and Sri Lanka."

The happiest days in Keerthi's political life followed the split with the WRP when he was able to collaborate closely with his co-thinkers in the ICFI in the development of political perspective. Dias concluded his remarks by quoting from the tribute paid to Keerthi by David North, chairman of the WSWs Editorial Board, in the preface to his book, *The Heritage We Defend*.

"In the preparation and writing of this book, the author benefitted immeasurably from the innumerable discussions he held with one of the most brilliant and irreconcilable Trotskyists of the post-World War II period—Keerthi Balasuriya, a leader of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League in Sri Lanka..."

"A fearless opponent of opportunism, comrade Balasuriya played a decisive role in the struggle to defend the International Committee against the attacks of the Workers Revolutionary Party. He brought to this struggle a vast and penetrating knowledge of the history of the Fourth International and a keen understanding of the implications of the decades-long fight against Pabloite revisionism."

At the conclusion of the meeting, the audience donated generously to the party's campaign fund to defeat the death threats made by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against SEP members on Kayts Island. Many stayed behind for informal discussion. Two of Keerthi's sisters were present and expressed their appreciation to the speakers for explaining the significance of his work for the international working class. A number of those present said that they had been particularly struck by the way in which Keerthi's study of the history of the ICFI had played such a crucial role in establishing a firm political basis for the RCL.



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