Shanmugam Sundaralingam 1956-2003

Untimely death of a Sri Lankan Trotskyist

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
6 August 2003

Shanmugam Sundaralingam, a member of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, died suddenly on August 1. He was a former Tamil plantation worker—one of the most oppressed layers of the Sri Lankan working class—and an SEP member for 10 years.

Sundaralingam collapsed last Friday at a shop near his home—a tiny "line" room on the Aislaby Plantations, in the Bandarawela area, 200 kilometres from Colombo. He was taken immediately to the tea estate's small dispensary, but was already dead when he arrived.

Sundaralingam, born on August 9, 1956, was just 47 years old. He leaves behind his wife, Kamala Sundaralingam, also a plantation worker and an SEP sympathiser. His death is a major loss for the SEP and will be keenly felt by his comrades.

Sundaralingam's funeral took place last Sunday on the tea plantation where he worked. Nearly 300 plantation workers, young people and villagers attended to pay their last respects. The funeral, held under the SEP's banner, was addressed by SEP Central Committee members R.M. Gunatilake, Nanda Wickramasinghe, Pani Wijesiriwardana and Iranganee Weerasinghe.

From the time that he joined the SEP in 1993, Sundaralingam fought courageously for workers' rights and international socialist principles. In 1997 he was victimised by management and summarily sacked in a bid to stop his political activity. In the same year he suffered a stroke and was partially paralysed. Months of medical treatment enabled him to speak again, but he still needed the aid of a stick to walk.

Right up to his death, Sundaralingam was taking medication for high blood pressure and for the after-effects of his stroke. Poor living conditions on the plantation and his victimisation were undoubtedly major factors contributing to his untimely death. The difficulties he faced arose out of the ruthless exploitation confronting workers throughout Sri Lanka's tea and rubber estates.

Sundaralingam came from a family of six, which traced its roots to southern India, where, from the late nineteenth century, the former British colonial rulers recruited hundreds of thousands of impoverished Tamils to labour in Sri Lanka's plantations—first coffee, then tea.

From the outset, the plantation workers faced terrible conditions. They were confined to the estates—isolated from other workers—and paid starvation wages. After initially being housed in squalid camps, each family was provided with a tiny "line room"—a single partitioned room in a long hut. Even today, most plantation workers still live in such quarters that were built in colonial times.

In 1948, just months after independence, and eight years before Sundaralingam was born, the United National Party government instituted the Citizenship Act, which deprived the entire Tamil plantation estate population of their citizenship rights, including the right to vote. Despite the fact that many families had lived in the country for generations, they were reduced to a second-class stateless status.

This anti-democratic attack was aimed at weakening the Sri Lankan working class by driving an ethnic wedge between Sinhala and Tamil speaking workers. The Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which had played a leading role in the struggle against British colonial rule, campaigned vigorously against the Citizenship Act, winning a powerful response in the working class, including among plantation workers, for its perspective of unifying workers regardless of ethnicity, language or religion. Significantly, the Tamil ruling elites supported the Citizenship Act.

But increasingly, under the impact of the post-war settlement, the LSSP began to repudiate a revolutionary Marxist perspective, based on the political independence of the working class, and adapt itself to the Sinhala chauvinist politics being espoused by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and its petty bourgeois agencies. In 1964, the LSSP's political degeneration culminated in its open abandonment of Trotskyism, when the party entered the bourgeois government of Madam Sirima Bandaranaike.

This Great Betrayal, as it became known, was to have profound consequences for the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. It led directly to the emergence of middle class radical parties based on communal politics—the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) among Tamils in the north and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) among Sinhala youth in the south. The dominance of Sinhala chauvinist politics in Colombo and the government's resort to anti-democratic measure against Tamils erupted in open civil war in 1983.

Sundaralingam's life was intimately bound up with these turbulent experiences. He was just eight years old at the time of the LSSP's betrayal. The immediate consequence was the notorious Sirima-Shastri Pact signed by Bandaranaike and Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. Under its terms, hundreds of thousands of plantation workers were forcibly repatriated to India, while some of those who remained were granted citizenship rights. The LSSP not only supported the persecution but its actions strengthened the grip over Tamil plantation workers of the conservative trade unions cum political parties such as the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC).

In 1964, Sundaralingam's father was transferred to the Aislaby plantation from another estate. Being a local leader of the DWC he was able to secure schooling for his son up to grade six. Most children on the plantations dropped out of school well before that level or had no education at all.

Sundaralingam was only young when his father died, cutting short his education and forcing him to look for a job to support his family.

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He could find only odd jobs in Colombo and in Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka. He returned to the Aislaby estate and became a temporary worker there in 1974. By this stage, a new Bandaranaike coalition government had nationalised the estates with the backing of the LSSP, a move that served to strengthen communalist tensions by lowering the working and living conditions of Tamil workers while providing management jobs to Sinhalese.

Sundaralingam spoke out against the injustices to plantation workers and was victimised on several occasions. As punishment, he was simply not hired for days on end, leaving him and his family to survive as best they could without pay. He remained a member of the DWC but became increasingly dissatisfied with its political manoeuvring with the government and its failure to defend the rights of workers.

Sundaralingam joined the Revolutionary Communist League (the forerunner of the SEP) in 1993 in the midst of widespread unrest on the estates. In 1992, the UNP government began to privatise the plantations, resulting in a drastic increase in the workload and growing anger among workers.

CWC leader Harry Chandrasekera nervously told the RCL's newspaper, *Kamkaru Mawatha* (Workers Path), at the time: "There may be an uprising of workers (in the plantations). A situation is developing that we cannot control." Anxious to head off this growing opposition, the union leaders persuaded plantation managements to grant a small pay rise and shut down any further campaign.

A layer of workers was disgusted with the actions of the CWC and other unions, and began to look elsewhere. Sundaralingam turned to the RCL. "Trade unions are averse to me now. I joined the DWC as I saw it as more militant than the CWC. Later it also changed. That is why I started reading this paper," he told RCL members. For Sundaralingam, the pages of the RCL's Tamil-language newspaper *Tholilalar Pathai* opened up a new world.

In the course of discussions with party members, Sundaralingam began to understand the political significance of the LSSP's betrayal, not only for plantation workers but for the working class as a whole. He was drawn to the RCL's program based on the unity of all workers—Tamil and Sinhala—and its opposition to all forms of nationalism and chauvinism. He was attracted in particular to the International Committee's analysis of world events.

Having joined the RCL, he campaigned courageously and tirelessly for its perspective among Tamil estate workers as well as among the oppressed Sinhalese people in the nearby villages. He constantly sought to explain the necessity of combatting the anti-Tamil chauvinism promoted by the Sinhala extremist organisations that sought to blame Tamil workers for the problems of landlessness and unemployment experienced by the Sinhalese villagers.

It is highly significant that a number of Sinhala villagers came to Sundaralingam's funeral and joined with Tamil estate workers to help prepare his burial place. It is rare for Sinhala villagers to participate in the funeral of a downtrodden Tamil estate worker, and constituted a powerful tribute to Sundaralingam's principled stand. As one villager recalled: "He was known to us as a person who spoke about revolution. He used to bring us the party publications and talk to us about world events."

Sundaralingam played a leading role in the struggles of plantation workers and in opposing the pernicious influence of the CWC and other union leaders. He was also prominent in the party's campaigns to release young plantation workers detained without trial as "LTTE suspects" under the country's draconian security legislation.

In response to the growing stature of the SEP among plantation workers, Sundaralingam was sacked in 1997—for leaving his work for a few minutes to get a drink of water. He challenged his dismissal in the labour tribunal, but the case was repeatedly delayed on spurious grounds. The tribunal had still not acted at the time of his death—six years after the sacking.

Despite his difficult economic circumstances and poor health, Sundaralingam was intensely loyal to the party. "He was a very good person. He wanted to be involved in politics and speak about politics. He had no other assets or property other than these things in this small cupboard," his wife Kamala explained. The cupboard held his books and was pasted with photographs of Lenin, Trotsky and the RCL's founding secretary Keerthi Balasuriya, who died in 1987.

Sundaralingham's memory was honoured at the funeral. One group of workers explained: "He would always talk about the party. He worked hard to explain the party's politics to us. His party was different from other parties. He told us about its working class program, workers' rights and the world political situation. He always insisted that we not limit ourselves and that we had to study world developments."

Others remarked: "We are very sad about his death. Now we have no one here to explain world developments to us. We learnt about the world situation from him although we couldn't see it with our own eyes. His demise is a loss for us.

"We accepted him as a learned man. He used to tell those who were not ready to agree with his politics: 'It doesn't matter that you don't accept our politics now. In the period ahead you will have to accept them.' He had such confidence in his political program. He used to say: 'Our present struggle for this socialist internationalist perspective will contribute to the future of our children'."

The SEP mourns Sundaralingam's untimely death and salutes this courageous fighter for socialism.

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