

SEP meeting commemorates veteran Sri Lankan Trotskyist

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a successful public meeting in Jaffna, the capital of the island's war-torn northern province, to pay tribute to Velupillai Sarawanaperumal, popularly known as "Papa", a longstanding SEP member, who died on April 14 from a chronic lung disease.

About 70 people, including workers and young people as well as friends and family members, participated in the meeting held at MPCS Auditorium on May 29. Sarawanaperumal's widow, Saraswathie, and Paranitharan, their only son, were also in the audience. Posters were put up and several thousand copies of Sarawanaperumal's obituary, published on the *World Socialist Web Site*, were distributed prior to the event.

The meeting was held amid growing political tensions on the island as a whole and in the northern and eastern provinces in particular. Attempts by President Chandrika Kumaratunga to restart stalled peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have opened up rifts within her own ruling coalition. Provocative moves by Sinhala chauvinist groups to build a Buddha statue in the eastern city of Trincomalee have intensified communal tensions.

The meeting began with a minute of silence. P. Sambandan, an SEP member in Jaffna, who chaired the meeting, explained: "This meeting is not just a ritual. We pay tribute to comrade Sarawanaperumal by examining his life and political work and learning the historical lessons of the world working class movement.

"The political history of comrade Sarawanaperumal is bound up with the history of the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). He was an intransigent fighter for the working class under the banner of internationalism

for 30 years. He studied scientific Marxist theory and fought for world socialism."

Sambandan detailed the massive destruction of life, property and infrastructure caused by the December 26 tsunami in southern Asia and the failure of the Sri Lankan ruling elites to establish a joint mechanism to distribute relief aid to the victims.

"These developments show that only the working class can provide a solution to the basic problems confronted by the Sinhala and Tamil working class and oppressed masses. Real peace can only be established by building a Sri Lanka-Eelam socialist republic through the unified struggle of Sinhala and Tamil workers. That struggle requires an independent political party of the working class. That party is the SEP."

SEP Central Committee member T. Chandrasekaran collaborated closely with Sarawanaperumal at his workplace—the Ceynor factory in Jaffna. He told the gathering: "Sarawanaperumal had great patience in dealing with any issue including political problems in his workplace. He used to think over problems. This quality was also seen in his profession as a technician.

"He understood that the trade unions cannot solve the deep-going problems of workers. He saw the necessity of the working class having its own political perspective and breaking from the bourgeois political program associated with the trade unions. He realised the need to build a revolutionary party of the working class and dedicated his life to that political struggle."

SEP Central Committee member M. Thevarajah who delivered the main speech, began by extending special thanks to Sarawanaperumal's family members for their participation.

"We have entered a period when the political program and perspective for which Papa fought can now be widely understood.... The 30 years from 1975,

when he joined the party, to 2005, when he died, has been a decisive period politically in Sri Lanka and internationally ...

“When Sarawanaperumal joined the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner to the SEP, in 1975, he chose not just a party in Sri Lanka or the north and east [of the island] but a world party. To unite the world working class in one organisation around a common perspective across race, religion and language, is a basic principle of our party.”

Thevarajah explained the difficult political conditions that existed when Sarawanaperumal joined. In 1964, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) had abandoned its Trotskyist principles and joined the bourgeois government of Mrs Bandaranaike. “The SLFP-LSSP-CP coalition government in the 1970s imposed a number of racially discriminatory and oppressive measures against Tamils, especially young people.

“LSSP opposed the 1956 bill to make Sinhala the only state language. But in 1972 it helped draw up and enact a new constitution enshrining Sinhala only. Under these circumstances, Tamil youth lost their faith in the LSSP and many turned to Tamil nationalism, including the politics and armed struggle of the LTTE. Likewise Sinhala youth turned to Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which preached seemingly radical politics mixed with communalism. Comrade Sarawanaperumal, however, joined the RCL, seeing that the working class needed the international socialist program that the LSSP had betrayed.”

Thevarajah described the RCL’s intervention in 1977 general elections against both Sinhala and Tamil bourgeois parties. The party contested seven electorates including Vaddukkodai in Jaffna peninsula on the basis of a socialist program to unify Sinhala and Tamil workers. The United National Party government of J. R. Jayawardene won the election and continued the discriminatory measures, provoking a racist pogrom against Tamils and civil war in 1983.

Thevarajah explained that in 1987, faced with growing social unrest in the south, Jayawardene signed an agreement with India to allow Indian “peace-keeping” troops into the north and east. “Speaking at a mass rally at Sudumalai near Jaffna, LTTE leader, V. Prabhakaran claimed that he was forced to accept the Indo-Lankan Accord under which the Indian military occupation took place. People were confused. Tamils,

as well as Sinhala rural youth in the south, faced ruthless repression under this Accord.

“We opposed this Accord. Our comrade Papa presided at a meeting at Nallur in Jaffna that put forward the perspective of a Sri Lanka and Eelam Socialist Republic as part of United Socialist Republics of Indian sub continent in opposition to this deal,” Thevarajah said.

The Accord broke down and civil war erupted again with devastating consequences. “Sarawanaperumal was among the hundreds of thousands who had to flee for their lives from one place to another. The war brought not only death and injury but also disease, malnutrition, illiteracy and all the associated social problems. It directly contributed to the poor health of our comrade.”

The speaker explained that capitalism has been incapable of resolving any of the problems confronting working people. Around the world, the bourgeoisie hailed the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracies in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s as “the end of socialism” and “the triumph of the market”. But the last decade and a half has produced economic stagnation, growing social inequality and war.

“Today 60 years after the end of World War II the threat of another world war is emerging... In conditions of a growing economic crisis, US imperialism is pursuing its interests through aggressive militarism raising the danger of a world-wide military conflagration.”

“The alternative is for workers in the US and internationally to unite and overthrow of the world imperialist system. This is the perspective and program of the SEP and the WSWS which comrade Sarawanaperumal fought for. I call upon you all to join with us in that struggle,” the speaker concluded.



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