

Greetings to Colombo memorial meeting for Keerthi Balasuriya

27 December 2007

We are publishing below messages to the memorial meeting in Colombo on December 23 from the Socialist Equality Parties of Germany and Britain. A message from the National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of Australia, Nick Beams, was published in the WSWS report of “Sri Lankan SEP Marks 20th anniversary of Keerthi Balasuriya” on December 20. On December 18 and 19, a two-part article by David North, National Secretary of the Socialist Equality Party of the US and Chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS was published, “Twenty years since the death of Keerthi Balasuriya.”

From Germany

Dear comrades,

Please accept our cordial greetings to the meeting commemorating 20 years since comrade Keerthi’s death.

Like many other members of the ICFI, we saw comrade Keerthi occasionally before the split with the WRP, but we were never really able to get to know him properly. Then, between 1985 and his premature death in 1987, we went through a period of intense political collaboration. It is still difficult to imagine that these were only two years, so vivid is the recollection of his extraordinary personality.

It is hard to find another person who combines in such an extraordinary manner firmness in principles, theoretical farsightedness and revolutionary determination, with a sense of humour and human warmth, as comrade Keerthi did. When we remember him, we always remember him laughing. He could cheerfully laugh about the stupidity of his political enemies—not maliciously or cynically, but full of faith in the superiority of the Marxist perspective he fought for.

Many of our members recall the important intervention made by Keerthi in Germany shortly before his death. In summer 1987 he participated in the summer camp of our section and spoke at a public meeting in Stuttgart. His intervention paved the way for the formation of the RCL exile organisation, which plays an important role in the work of the WSWS today.

At the meeting in Stuttgart, attended by nearly 100 Tamils, Keerthi directly attacked the Indo-Sri Lanka agreement and denounced its reactionary character. He explained that this agreement made clear that the various Tamil nationalist organisations were incapable of carrying out a genuine struggle for the democratic rights of the Tamil minority. He dealt with the theory of permanent revolution as the basis for the unification of the Tamil and Sinhala working class, as part of the struggle for socialism in Sri Lanka and the Indian sub-continent.

The profundity of Keerthi’s contributions flowed from the role he had played in defending the program of Trotskyism from Pabloite revisionism, first in the struggle against the betrayal of the LSSP in Sri Lanka and then, most importantly, in 1985 against the betrayal of Trotskyist principles by the opportunist leadership of the WRP. It was

clear upon hearing Keerthi’s speeches at that time that there could not be the slightest compromise on these issues.

Keerthi’s intervention provided the basis for the recruitment of Tamil members, who have played an important role in building the ICFI in Germany as well as in France. In this way, Keerthi’s political heritage and profound grasp of historical development has struck deep roots in the heart of the European continent.

All of those who had met and worked with Keerthi at that time will never forget his patience in explaining complex political and historical issues and his determination to illuminate and educate workers and young people irrespective of their nationality or background.

His quiet and unassuming nature concealed a fierce and passionate adherence to Marxist and internationalist principles, which left an indelible impression on all those who met him. His death at just the age of 39 was a cruel blow to our international movement, but to the extent we continue to adhere to the principles he fought for, Keerthi’s memory and ideals will remain fresh and a source of inspiration for a new generation of revolutionary fighters.

With warmest comradely greetings,

Peter Schwarz, Secretary of the ICFI

Ulrich Rippert, National Secretary of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit

From Britain

Let me first send our love and a continued sense of shared loss to Vilani, Keerthi’s family, comrades and friends from your comrades in Britain.

I do not claim to have known Keerthi very closely, or for very long. But I would like to say something about my own personal experiences of him.

I only became aware of Keerthi at all during the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party. It was then that I first heard of the early disputes with Michael Banda over the Indian invasion of Bangladesh and the appalling treatment of the Revolutionary Communist League by the WRP leadership as the British party pursued its opportunist efforts to build relations with the Tamil Tigers.

My personal contact with Keerthi, however, only began at the Second Plenum of the International Committee in October 1986. And from that time until his death in December 1987, I only ever met him at plenum meetings—four in total—over a brief period of just thirteen months.

Yet these were times that left an indelible imprint. They were made up of hour-upon-hour of intense political discussion, during which the International Committee sought to draw out all of the essential lessons from the split with the WRP and to reorient the Fourth International, based on the historic and theoretical legacy of the Trotskyist movement and a critical examination of the contemporary

developments within world capitalism.

I must admit that initially I felt somewhat nervous and decidedly unprepared for this challenge. I had only joined the WRP in 1983 and was 25 when I attended my first IC meeting three years later. Moreover the WRP in its later years was not what one would call a good school. But any subjective concerns I had about being catapulted into a leadership position “too soon” were put into perspective when I learned that Keerthi had become the RCL’s national secretary when only twenty years of age.

More importantly, he was one of those who helped teach me what being a leader in the socialist movement was really about. During plenum meetings, he would listen intently to what was being said, all the while making scrupulous notes. When he spoke, he did so quietly but with confidence. And his remarks were always illuminating and grounded in a rich grasp of Marxism, which he was able to creatively apply—to analyse the world political situation, to define the attitude of the working class to the civil war raging in Sri Lanka and to the fight for socialism on the Indian sub-continent.

He was not an imposing man in terms of stature, or in his demeanour. But during the split I had seen enough of those who were, to use a Northern expression, “all mouth and trousers” to know when I was in the presence of the genuine article.

Keerthi possessed a truly imposing *intellect* which, matched to his deeply held convictions, lent gravitas to his words and demanded your respect. He was a great leader because he was a truly profound thinker.

During those meetings, Keerthi played a vital role in the theoretical work of the IC in determining its attitude to the much trumpeted “reform wing” of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, which we defined as a pro-imperialist formation and a mortal threat to the gains of the October Revolution. He participated in the development of what was to become a new international perspectives resolution of the ICFI in August 1988. And his discussion with David North on the post-colonial experiences of the workers and peasant masses was to help lay the foundations for a strategic reorientation on the question of self-determination that will play a fundamental role in the building of the ICFI in the greater part of the world.

When I learned of Keerthi’s death, like everyone else I was stunned. He was still so very young and had so much more to contribute. In the following weeks and months, the IC and its sections paid their respects to his memory. It was a time of collective mourning, but not just that. What stood out from that day until today were the efforts made to make comrades understand the full historic importance of the powerful political legacy Keerthi had left behind.

Allow me to recall the letter on Keerthi’s death sent by David North to comrades in India in January 1988. He insisted that the IC had “lost a great revolutionist whose contribution to the struggle for world socialist revolution is of a historic character. Keerthi’s life was an expression of single-minded dedication to the cause of the proletariat, in whose world-historic mission he had an unshakeable confidence.”

He was, North continued, someone whose significance “is immeasurably greater than the Mao Zedongs and other heroes of the petty bourgeoisie” and who had “thoroughly assimilated the teachings of Lenin and Trotsky, and on this basis was able to make a profoundly original contribution to the understanding of the struggle of the proletariat in the backward countries.”

North insisted that “it is our supreme responsibility to defend and develop the principles for which he fought in the international working class movement. Each cadre of the International Committee,

above all those who are in positions of leadership, must exert all their mental and physical energies to meet the additional responsibilities that fall upon us as a result of Keerthi’s death. No single cadre can fill the void left by his death. But collectively we must carry our and his work forward.”

I remember finding these words inspiring at the time. I find them no less so today. And Keerthi has indeed been honoured by his comrades in Sri Lanka and India, not just formally but in their unstinting and truly heroic efforts to construct a socialist leadership in the working class. We in Britain salute not only Keerthi’s memory, but also the party he led so well and which stands today as a living political testament to his enduring significance.

Chris Marsden, National Secretary, Socialist Equality Party of Britain

From Jaffna

It is twenty years since we lost Keerthi. I was able to hear Keerthi speak for the first time in 1978 at a meeting in Colombo held in defence of sacked workers of the Thulhiriya and Pugoda textile factories. After that, I heard him at party meetings and public meetings.

The steadfastness, courage and strength of Keerthi and his speeches, his ability to lead and win struggles, still lives in my mind. We learned Trotskyism from him. In political and theoretical classes in those days he explained that only through analyses of the world situation and knowledge of the history of our movement can perspectives be developed.

Keerthi visited the Jaffna peninsula in the late 1970s and addressed a meeting in Jaffna. He visited Mulai hospital and factories at Karainagar and Kurunagar to speak to the workers. He explained the way out for Tamils is only through the struggle for socialism. He also explained that the barrier to the struggle for socialism was the crisis of working class leadership and our task was to resolve that crisis. We are carrying out that task.

T. Chandrasekaran on behalf of the Jaffna SEP members



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