Twenty years since the death of Keerthi Balasuriya

Part one

David North
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This is the first of a two-part article. The second part *will be posted Wednesday, December 19.*

It is with profound respect and a continuing sense of loss that the International Committee of the Fourth International marks today the 20th anniversary of the sudden and terribly premature death of Keerthi Balasuriya. Even after the passage of so many years, for all those who knew and worked with Comrade Keerthi the sense of political and personal loss remains acute.

His death on the morning of December 18, 1987, while at work in the offices of the Sri Lankan Revolutionary Communist League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party), came without any warning. Less than one month had passed since he had returned from Europe, where he had attended a meeting of the International Committee. Keerthi was at his desk, writing a statement on the political lessons of the 1985-86 split in the ICFI, when he suffered a fatal heart attack. He was only 39. Comrade Keerthi, had he lived, would only now be looking forward to his 60th birthday.

But for all that we lost with his premature death, Comrade Keerthi left behind a substantial and enduring legacy of political work that constitutes an essential foundation of the world Trotskyist movement.

Notwithstanding the immense political and economic changes of the past two decades, the issues and problems with which Keerthi grappled remain no less urgent and relevant today than they were at the time of his death.

Keerthi was born on November 4, 1948, little more than one year after both India and Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was called until 1972) acquired state independence on the basis of squalid deals between British imperialism and the national bourgeoisie of the subcontinent. In different ways, the settlements reached between the Indian and Ceylonese national bourgeoisie on the one hand and imperialism on the other set the stage for all the political tragedies that were to unfold over the next six decades.

These settlements demonstrated that the national bourgeoisie of India and Ceylon feared social revolution far more than they desired genuine independence. Gandhi and Nehru accepted the partition of India along religious lines, a betrayal of the democratic and social aspirations of the masses that has cost the lives of millions, condemned the subcontinent to recurrent wars, and consolidated the grip of imperialism over the region. In Ceylon, the “independence” fashioned by the national bourgeoisie institutionalized systematic discrimination against the Tamil minority and sowed the seeds of the future civil war.

The betrayal of the independence struggle by the national bourgeoisie vindicated the central tenets of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which insisted that the historically progressive tasks of the democratic anti-imperialistic struggle could be achieved only through the conquest of power by the working class, led by a Marxist party based on an internationalist and socialist program.

In fact, in the aftermath of the formal transfer of power to the Indian and Ceylonese bourgeoisie, the principles of the theory of permanent revolution were invoked by the leaders of the Ceylonese Trotskyist movement, who condemned the terms upon which independence was achieved. However, over the following decade, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—the Trotskyist party—drifted steadily to the right.

While this process developed in response to the pressures of the national environment, which encouraged all sorts of opportunist adaptations in the pursuit of parliamentary gains, a key factor in the degeneration of the LSSP was the general growth of revisionist tendencies inside the Fourth International. Led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, these forces systematically covered up for and even encouraged the opportunist orientation of the LSSP.

The protracted political degeneration reached its climax in 1964, when the LSSP, which still enjoyed a mass following in the working class, agreed to join the crisis-ridden bourgeois government of Madam Bandaranaike. This was a turning point in the history both of Ceylon and the Fourth International. In the case of the latter, the entry of the LSSP into a reactionary political coalition with the bourgeoisie exposed the counter-revolutionary nature of Pabloite revisionism. For Ceylon, the formation of the coalition set into motion the process that led inexorably, within less than 20 years, to the eruption of civil war.

Keerthi Balasuriya’s education consisted above all in assimilating the political lessons of these experiences. The International Committee played the central role in this process. Having been formed as a product of the political struggle against Pablo and Mandel which erupted inside the Fourth International in 1953, the International Committee had followed developments in Ceylon and drawn attention to the increasingly opportunist course of the LSSP.

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In the aftermath of the LSSP's entry into coalition, the British Trotskyists under the leadership of Gerry Healy mounted a political offensive against the LSSP that found a response among the best sections of the Trotskyist student youth in Ceylon. The work of political clarification, which spanned several years, led to the formation of the Revolutionary Communist League in 1968. Keerthi was elected to the post of general secretary.

It did not take long before the RCL and Comrade Keerthi confronted a major political test. The treachery of the LSSP weakened the working class movement, helped split the peasantry from the workers, created immense political confusion and created a climate favorable for the growth of Maoist influence among significant sections of the peasant and student youth. This led to the formation and rapid growth of the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—People's Liberation Front).

This organization projected an image of ferocious anti-imperialist militancy. It required both political courage and Marxist perspicacity to detect and expose the essentially petty-bourgeois and reactionary political perspective concealed within the revolutionary rhetoric of the JVP.

In 1970, Keerthi wrote *The Class Nature and Politics of the JVP*, which clearly established the petty-bourgeois and anti-Marxist character of this organization. Its leader, Wijeweera, threatened that Keerthi would be hanged when the JVP came to power.

But in 1971, the coalition government launched a ferocious wave of repression against the JVP and its supporters among the rural youth. Notwithstanding its irreconcilable differences with the JVP, the RCL launched a campaign against the government's repression. Even the JVP was compelled to acknowledge the principled character of the RCL's politics. After his release from prison, Wijeweera personally went to the headquarters of the RCL to express his appreciation of the party's campaign. (This did not prevent the JVP from launching attacks against RCL cadre in the late 1980s.)

An even more significant demonstration of Keerthi's political firmness and strength of character was shown in his criticism of the position taken by the British Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League in support of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's decision to send troops into East Pakistan, supposedly in support of the Bengali liberation movement. A statement written by Michael Banda of the SLL (predecessor of the Workers Revolutionary Party), published on December 6, 1971, declared, "We critically support the decision of the Indian bourgeois government to give military and economic aid to Bangladesh."

The position adopted by the RCL was diametrically opposed to that of the SLL. An RCL statement published on December 8, 1971 declared: "The Trotskyist movement, representing the revolutionary interests of the proletariat, defines its position in relation to all these movements, struggles and conflicts from the standpoint of the proletarian struggle for socialism. It declares emphatically and unequivocally that the task of the proletariat is not that of supporting any one of the warring factions of the bourgeoisie, but that of utilizing each and every conflict in the camp of the class enemy for the seizure of power with the perspective of setting up a federated socialist republic which alone would be able to satisfy the social and national aspirations of the millions of toilers in the subcontinent."

Lacking the type of instantaneous communications that exist today, the RCL was not aware of the SLL's position when it published its own statement. When the SLL statement arrived in Colombo, Keerthi instructed that the RCL immediately withdraw its own position from public circulation. He did so because, as he wrote to Cliff Slaughter, the secretary of the ICFI, "clarity inside the international is more important than anything else" and "it is impossible for us to build a national section without fighting to build the international." However, in explaining the RCL's disagreement with the SLL, Keerthi did not mince words in his December 16, 1971 letter to Slaughter:

"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."

On January 11, 1972, Keerthi dispatched another letter to London, this time in reply to Mike Banda's enthusiastic support for Gandhi's intervention. He detected in Banda's position a retreat from the Trotskyist principles which previously had been defended by the ICFI against the Pabloites.

"The logic of the false political position of the IC on Bangladesh would have and has led to the abandonment of all the past experiences of the Marxist movement regarding the struggle of the colonial masses. Now it is evident that these attempts are tending to move in the direction of revising all the capital gains made by the SLL leadership in the fight against the SWP during the 1961-63 period. Your December 27 letter was nothing more than an attempt to defend a political position which completely breaks with Marxism. By attempting to defend it you have distorted Marxism, drowned yourself in confusion and exposed your political bankruptcy."

Keerthi's prescient letters were not circulated within the International Committee by the Socialist Labour League. Realizing that the RCL was capable of adopting an independent and critical attitude to the work of the ICFI, the Socialist Labour League set out to isolate the Sri Lankan Trotskyists and Comrade Keerthi.

The more the SLL (and then the WRP) drifted to the right, the more pernicious and ruthless the efforts to isolate the RCL became. It was not until the eruption of the political crisis within the British organization and the International Committee in 1985 that it became possible for these valuable letters to find an audience within the International movement.

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