

Twenty years since the death of Keerthi Balasuriya

Part two

David North
19 December 2007

This is the concluding part of a two-part article. The first part was posted Tuesday, December 18.

The impressionistic response of the Socialist Labour League to the Indian government's military intervention in East Pakistan and its vindictive reaction to the Revolutionary Communist League's criticisms reflected a deepening political crisis within the British organization. It was hardly an accident that Michael Banda had emerged as the spokesman for the SLL's endorsement of the Indian government's policies. For several years he had been expressing doubt about the relevance of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which insisted upon the central and decisive revolutionary role of the working class in the struggle against imperialism.

Had not the victory of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, Mao Zedong in China, and even Tito in Yugoslavia demonstrated the possibility of alternative paths to socialism, based on the armed struggle of the peasantry? For Banda, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's intervention in East Pakistan, an action which antagonized the Nixon administration, was yet another form of anti-imperialist struggle. It demonstrated, in Banda's view, that the national bourgeoisie in Asia was capable of revolutionary initiatives which contradicted Trotsky's perspective.

Fearful of the organizational disruption that might result from an open conflict within the SLL leadership over basic programmatic issues, Gerry Healy, the principal leader of the British section, sought to avoid a discussion of the political differences. Moreover, Banda was hardly alone in his doubts about the viability of the Trotskyist perspective. In the 1960s the political radicalization of significant sections of the petty bourgeoisie had substantially increased the social constituency for the sort of revisionist politics that had been pioneered by Pablo and Mandel. The SLL itself had benefited organizationally from the radicalization of student youth. To the extent that the SLL retreated from its earlier intransigence on essential questions of revolutionary program and perspective, newly radicalized youth and other elements from the petty bourgeoisie entered the British movement without undergoing the necessary education in the history and principles of the Fourth International. This danger was compounded by the fact that the politically influential strata of professional academics who played a major role in the theoretical and educational work of the SLL was particularly susceptible to the lure of various forms of petty-bourgeois revisions of Marxism.

It was in this increasingly murky political environment that the SLL leadership rationalized its evasion of the struggle for programmatic clarity by arguing that agreement on philosophical method was far more important. Indeed, in an astonishing redefinition of the approach that the Trotskyist movement had taken throughout its history, Healy and his principal advisor on matters theoretical, Cliff Slaughter, began to argue that the very discussion of program was a real impediment to the

development of dialectical thought! And so there appeared in the documents of the International Committee the claim, authored by Slaughter, that the "experience of building the revolutionary party in Britain" had demonstrated "that a thoroughgoing and difficult struggle against idealist ways of thinking was necessary which went much deeper than questions of agreement on program and policy." [*Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Vol. 6, London, 1975, p. 83.]

Healy may not have clearly understood (though Professor Cliff Slaughter certainly did) that the type of separation of the "struggle for Marxist theory" from the development of the revolutionary perspective of the working class advocated in this and similar formulations represented a dangerous political and theoretical capitulation to conceptions that were wildly popular in the petty-bourgeois milieu of the anti-Marxist New Left. But however Healy rationalized his position in his own mind, the new theoretical arguments both reflected and encouraged skepticism about the historic role of the Fourth International.

As Slaughter wrote in 1972: "Will revolutionary parties, able to lead the working class to power and the building of socialism, be built simply by bringing the program, the existing forces of Trotskyism, onto the scene of political developments caused by the crisis? Or will it not be necessary to conduct a conscious struggle for *theory*, for the negation of all the past experience and theory of the movement into the transformed reality of the class struggle." [Ibid, p. 226]

It is only necessary to strip this passage of its rhetorical form and deconstruct its pretentious pseudo-philosophical syntax, so beloved of petty-bourgeois academics, to expose the two distinctly revisionist and politically liquidationist positions that were being advanced by Slaughter: 1) The Trotskyist movement, based on the historically developed program of the Fourth International, would not be able to lead the working class to power; and 2) The "transformed reality of the class struggle" [a favorite Pabloite phrase] required a "conscious struggle for *theory*," which consisted of the "negation" [i.e., the junking] "of all the past experience and theory of the movement."

For Healy, Banda and Slaughter, these formulations were not merely a matter for abstract debate. As the 1970s unfolded, they sought to implement them with a vengeance. Increasingly dismissive of the programmatic heritage of Trotskyism, the SLL became hostile to the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International ["the existing forces of Trotskyism"] and began to search for other political forces with whom new alliances could be constructed. These were eventually to be found in national movements and regimes in the Middle East.

This right-wing shift in the politics of the SLL (which became the Workers Revolutionary Party in November 1973) underlay the deepening isolation of Keerthi Balasuriya and the Revolutionary Communist League

within the International Committee. The RCL's criticisms of the SLL response to the Indo-Pak War of 1971 were taken by Healy, Banda and Slaughter, quite correctly, as an indication that the Ceylonese/Sri Lankan section would not go along with their abandonment of Trotskyist politics.

Despite the extremely difficult conditions under which the Sri Lankan comrades conducted their work, which were worsened by the fact that they were denied any semblance of fraternal support and collaboration within the ICFI, the RCL continued to defend the principles of Trotskyism. Particularly noteworthy in this regard was the party's response to government-instigated anti-Tamil pogroms that broke out in Colombo in July 1983. In the face of brutal repressive measures, the RCL spoke out fearlessly in opposition to the anti-Tamil campaign.

Even under these dangerous conditions, the RCL received no support from the international movement, which remained under the control of the Workers Revolutionary Party. The WRP actually posted a statement in its newspaper, written by Michael Banda, which noted in passing that "It is possible, even probable, that the police and army [in Sri Lanka] have used the arbitrary and uncontrolled powers granted to them under the emergency laws to kill our comrades and destroy their press." However, the statement issued neither a condemnation of this persecution nor a call for an international campaign for the defense of the Revolutionary Communist League.

The Workers Revolutionary Party took care not to inform the Revolutionary Communist League of the serious theoretical and political criticisms raised by the Workers League between October 1982 and February 1984. In January 1984, the Political Committee of the Workers League specifically requested that Comrade Keerthi be invited to London to attend a meeting of the ICFI at which new criticisms of the political line of the Workers Revolutionary Party were to be discussed.

However, when I arrived in London, I was told by Michael Banda that it had not been possible to establish contact with the Sri Lankan comrades and, therefore, Keerthi would not be present at the meeting. Banda's gross lie demonstrated the lengths to which the WRP leadership was prepared to go in order to prevent a principled discussion of political differences within the International Committee. In fact, Healy, Banda and Slaughter had simply decided among themselves not to inform the RCL of the scheduled meeting.

However, the eruption of a dirty scandal and intense organizational crisis within the WRP, the culmination of more than a decade of opportunism, made it impossible for the WRP leaders to continue to block political discussion within the International Committee. In late October 1985, Keerthi, with the assistance of the Australian section, flew to London. Upon his arrival, he was almost immediately called into the office of Michael Banda, who proceeded to regale him at great length with the salacious details of the sexual scandal involving Healy. When Banda had finally exhausted himself, Keerthi asked: "What precisely, Comrade Mike, are your *political* differences with Gerry Healy?" The question seemed to catch Banda off balance. Unable to formulate an answer of his own, Banda handed Keerthi a copy of the report that I had given to the ICFI meeting in February 1984, which consisted of a detailed criticism of the political line of the Workers Revolutionary Party.

On Sunday morning, October 20, 1985, I received a call from Banda informing me that a statement was about to be published in the *Newslines*, the WRP newspaper, announcing the expulsion of Healy. This decision had been taken without any discussion within the International Committee. Almost as an afterthought Banda told me that Keerthi and Nick Beams, the secretary of the Australian section, were in London. Were they available to speak to me, I asked? Banda's evasive answer quickly convinced me that there was no use pursuing the matter with him.

After hanging up, I called the offices of the WRP on another line and asked to speak to Nick and Keerthi. When Keerthi came to the phone, he stated at once, "I have read your political criticisms, and am in agreement

with them." Nick, Keerthi and I agreed that it was necessary to discuss the political issues raised by the crisis that had broken out in the WRP and develop a unified response within the International Committee. That evening I flew to London. Though I had known Keerthi since the early 1970s, it was only with the outbreak of the struggle within the ICFI that my political collaboration with this extraordinary man really began.

The political struggle that unfolded in the weeks and months that followed marked a turning point in the history of the Fourth International. The source of the political strength that has been demonstrated by the International Committee during the past two decades of tumultuous upheavals is to be found in the high level of theoretical clarity and programmatic agreement achieved on the basis of the detailed analysis of the crisis and break-up of the Workers Revolutionary Party. It is not an exaggeration to state that there is not another struggle within the history of the Trotskyist movement in which the political and theoretical issues underlying the split were analyzed in such depth and detail.

The role played by Keerthi during this period was of an absolutely critical character. His vast knowledge of the history of the revolutionary socialist movement was combined with an exceptional capacity for political analysis. Poring over the political statements produced by the WRP between 1973 and 1985, Keerthi would discover those critical passages in which he detected a retreat from Marxism. The significance of the passage upon which Keerthi had focused was not always immediately apparent. He would then rephrase it, and begin to expound on its practical implications.

These insights would be supplemented by references to the history of the Marxist movement. As the discussion unfolded, it became clear that more was involved than the scoring of an additional polemical point. Keerthi was engaged in the elaboration of a comprehensive critique of the theory and practice of the political opportunism associated with the conceptions of Pablo and Mandel that had wreaked havoc inside the Fourth International.

The essential conclusion of this critique was summed up in an editorial published in the *Fourth International*, the theoretical journal of the ICFI, in March 1987:

"Thus the revisionism that attacked the Fourth International after World War II was a class phenomenon which reflected the changing political needs of imperialism itself. Confronted with the emergence of proletarian revolution, imperialism had to open up possibilities for new layers of the middle classes to assume the role of a buffer between its interests and that of the proletariat. Pabloite revisionism translated these basic needs of imperialism and the class interests of the petty bourgeoisie into those vital theoretical formulae which justified the adaptation of the Trotskyist movement to these forces. It pandered to the futile illusion that the petty bourgeoisie, through its control of the state apparatus, can create socialism without the old bourgeois state first being destroyed by proletarian revolution in which the working class—not various middle class surrogates—is the principal historical actor.

"As early as 1951, the sweeping political generalizations drawn by Pablo from the peculiar circumstances of capitalism's overthrow in Eastern Europe were worked into programmatic innovations whose revisionist content went well beyond its linking of socialism to a nuclear Armageddon (the theory of 'war-revolution'). The conception that there existed a road to socialism that did not depend upon either the revolutionary initiative of a mass proletarian movement or upon the construction of independent proletarian parties led by Marxists became the *idée fixe* of Pabloism. Thus, the central axis of its revisions was not simply its evaluation of Stalinism and the possibilities for its 'self-

reform.’ That was only one of the many ugly faces of Pabloite revisionism.

“The essential revision of Pabloism, and what has made it so useful to imperialism, is its attack on the most fundamental premises of scientific socialism. The scientifically-grounded conviction that the liberation of the proletariat is the task of the proletariat itself and that the task of socialism *begins* with the dictatorship of the proletariat—as Marx indicated as far back as 1851—is directly challenged by Pabloism, whose theory of socialism assigns the main role to the petty bourgeoisie. And while Pabloism from time to time pays formal homage to the working class, it never goes so far as to insist that neither the overthrow of capitalism nor the construction of socialism are possible without the existence of a very high level of theoretical consciousness, produced through the many years of struggle which are required to build a Marxist party, in a substantial section of the proletariat.

“The unrestrained opportunism which has always characterized the tactics employed by the Pabloites flows inexorably from their rejection of the proletarian foundation of socialism. The Marxist understands that the education of the proletariat in a scientific appreciation of its long-term historical tasks requires a principled line. He therefore *prefers* temporary isolation to short-term gains that are purchased at the expense of the political clarification of the working class. But the Pabloite is not ‘restrained’ by such considerations. His tactics are directed toward the subordination of the independence of the proletariat to whatever nonproletarian forces temporarily dominate the mass movement.” [Volume 14, No. 1, March 1987, p. iii-iv]

The work that was carried out in the aftermath of the split with the Workers Revolutionary Party was extraordinarily intense. I had the privilege of working side by side with Keerthi on many of the documents produced during that period. I recall the many hours of discussion out of which the documents emerged. But I remember not only the political discussions. Keerthi’s interests were wide-ranging.

Before he turned to politics, Keerthi, while still a student, had displayed substantial promise as a poet. He possessed a broad knowledge of literature, music and the arts. For all his intellectual rigor, Keerthi was exceptionally kind and humane in his relationships with comrades and friends. His socialist convictions flowed from a deep-rooted sympathy with the conditions of the oppressed and concern for the fate of mankind.

Twenty years after his death, Comrade Keerthi remains a powerful political and moral presence in our international movement. In the two decades since his death, the political forces against which he fought relentlessly—the bourgeois nationalists, the Stalinists, the Maoists, the anti-Trotskyist renegades of the LSSP, the WRP and other revisionist tendencies—have been discredited by events. The revolutionary offensive of the working class will inevitably give rise to a renewed and passionate interest in genuine Marxism. Enormous opportunities to expand the political influence of the International Committee will soon present themselves. But these opportunities must be grasped as a means of achieving historical aims, rather than mere tactical advantages. It is through the unrelenting struggle to uphold the perspective of world socialist revolution that we honor the memory and continue the work of Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya.

Concluded



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