

SEP-ISSE memorial meeting in Colombo

Commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the death of Keerthi Balasuriya

Our correspondents
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The Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) held a powerful public meeting on December 23 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the death of Keerthi Balasuriya. Keerthi was general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, from the time of its founding in 1968 until his untimely death at the age of 39 from a massive heart attack, while working at the RCL's Colombo offices on December 18, 1987.

Nearly 200 workers, youth and professional people attended the meeting, which was held at the Mahaweli Centre in Colombo, to pay tribute to the memory of this leading member of the world Trotskyist movement. Among the participants were Nandawathie Attanayake, Keerthi's 82-year-old mother, and several other family members.

"I am very happy to see this number of people gathered to pay their respects to my son twenty years after his death. I know that you [the SEP] have commemorated him every year... I am somewhat emotional at the moment and cannot say any more. Thank you very much for inviting me and organising this event," Keerthi's mother told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Party members and supporters from Colombo and other parts of the island gathered in the meeting hall, along with old contacts who had known Keerthi in the early years, and others who had come to know of his role in the party more recently. Many people could be seen deep in discussion, exchanging their memories of the RCL leader.

SEP General Secretary and WSWs International Editorial Board (IEB) member Wije Dias was the main speaker, and K. Ratnayake from the SEP political committee chaired the meeting. Vilani Peiris, an SEP political committee member and Keerthi's life partner also addressed the meeting, along with political committee member M. Thevarajah and Kapila Fernando, convener of the ISSE in Sri Lanka.

Ratnayake opened the proceedings by calling for a minute's silence to pay tribute to Keerthi Balasuriya's memory. After describing the circumstances of his unexpected death, Ratnayake emphasised that on the twentieth anniversary of that tragic event, it was critical that the lessons of Keerthi's political struggle be thoroughly assimilated.

The international working class was passing through a decisive period, he said. In South Asia, the ruling classes had been driven into serious crises, while the Sri Lankan government of President Mahinda Rajapakse had dragged working people and the oppressed masses into renewed civil war.

"Only the SEP is advancing a socialist perspective for the working class in Sri Lanka and South Asia as part of the struggle of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) throughout

the world. This is no accident. The SEP represents the continuation of the struggle led by Keerthi to form the RCL, based on the lessons of the ICFI's fight against Pabloite opportunism and the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) when it renounced Trotskyism and entered into the bourgeois coalition government in 1964," Ratnayake explained.

"Keerthi was very happy during the last few years of his life because of the successful struggle waged in collaboration with other leaders of our international movement—particularly David North, national secretary of the Workers League in the US, now the Socialist Equality Party—to defend Trotskyism against the opportunism represented by the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain.

"Comrade Keerthi studied philosophy, history, art and literature. He told us that, as Lenin insisted, 'We are preparing the working class for the greatest task in history—the socialist revolution. For that, an international party armed with the most advanced theory is required'."

Ratnayake read messages sent by Nick Beams, national secretary of the Australian SEP, Chris Marsden, national secretary of the British SEP, Ulrich Rippert, national secretary of the German SEP (PSG) and Peter Schwarz, the secretary of the ICFI. Ratnayake also referred to the two-part article written by David North, and published on the WSWs on December 18 and 19.

SEP member Chandrasekar sent a message on behalf of party members in the war-ravaged north of the island, because they were unable to participate and Arun Kumar, secretary of the Socialist Labor League in India, which is in political solidarity with the ICFI also sent greetings.

Vilani Peiris told the meeting that Comrade Keerthi's teachings were today being vindicated, and that he continued to live in the struggles of the ICFI and the SEP in Sri Lanka, and through the daily work of the WSWs.

Peiris concentrated on Keerthi's struggle to expose the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), referring to his book, *The Class Nature and Politics of the JVP*. She pointed out that in 1970 Keerthi understood that the JVP was part of an international phenomenon. He analysed its emergence in the context of the various petty-bourgeois radical movements that called for "women power for women", "black power for black people" and "student power for students" in both the advanced and backward capitalist countries in the late 1960s as world capitalism entered a deep-going crisis and millions of young people were being radicalised.

"He pointed out how the JVP was a petty-bourgeois organisation

hostile to the struggle of the working class for socialism.” Assessing the JVP’s chauvinist politics, side by side with its socialist rhetoric, Keerthi warned that it could be used in the coming period by the extreme right wing to attack the working class. “This evolution was demonstrated in the period of 1988-1990 when the JVP carried out fascistic attacks against the RCL and the working class,” Peiris explained.

Peiris reviewed the principled campaign launched by the RCL under Keerthi’s leadership to demand the release of rural youth arrested and detained by the former Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP)-led coalition government in its brutal efforts to crush the JVP-led rebellion in 1971.

She referred to an open letter written by Keerthi in reply to an invitation from H.N. Fernando, former leader of the pro-JVP Ceylon Teachers Union, to the RCL to join his alliance with the Christian church in the name of “releasing political prisoners”. Thoroughly rejecting Fernando’s invitation, Comrade Keerthi pointed out that political prisoners could be released only through the independent mobilisation of the working class. He insisted on the revolutionary role of the working class, its independence from all other classes and the necessity of an internationalist orientation and the fight for socialism.

One of the most critical issues confronting the RCL/SEP in Sri Lanka has been the Tamil question.

Political committee member M. Thevarajah told the audience: “In 1987 Indian troops were brought to northern and eastern Sri Lanka to crush the Tamil struggle against the racial oppression that was being implemented under the Indo-Lanka accord and to release Sri Lankan troops to carry out their repression in the south. This was a testing time for all political parties.

“Comrade Keerthi pointed out that the only way to fight the Indian invasion and to defend the democratic rights of the Tamil people was through the unified struggle of Sinhala and Tamil workers to overthrow capitalist rule and establish a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka-Eelam as a part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia. He exposed the bankruptcy of the various armed petty bourgeois movements, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.”

Addressing the meeting, ISSE convenor Kapila Fernando stated: “Comrade Keerthi grappled with the burning problems facing mankind—exploitation, war, unemployment, education, health, problems related to art and culture. The most important thing was how he approached these problems. Contrary to the conceptions of “armed struggle” spread among the youth by various radical movements, Keerthi developed his approach based on scientific socialism, Marxism, Trotskyism.”

Referring to the political campaigns conducted by the RCL and its youth movement, the Young Socialists (YS) against the United National Party (UNP) government’s attacks on free education, like the 1982 Education White Paper, Fernando said: “The RCL and YS fought to turn the students towards the working class.”

Following the other speakers, Wijie Dias delivered the main report. “As mentioned in the messages sent by leading comrades in the various countries of the world Trotskyist movement,” Dias began, “the death of comrade Keerthi Balasuriya was a serious loss, not just for the Revolutionary Communist League and the SEP, not just for the working class and oppressed masses in Sri Lanka and the Indian sub-continent, but also for the working class movement throughout the world... For more than two decades we fought alongside Comrade Keerthi, learnt from him and learnt with him to struggle for the resolution of the crisis of leadership of the working class and for the

future of mankind.”

Dias elaborated how a group of young comrades including Keerthi, along with the veteran Trotskyist Wilfred Pereira (Spike), struggled to draw the lessons of the great betrayal by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in 1964. This struggle led to the founding of the RCL in 1968 as a section of the ICFI, under its political and theoretical guidance.

Referring to the unanimous election of Keerthi as the general secretary of the RCL by its founding congress in 1968, at the very young age of less than 20, Dias stated: “It meant that he was politically and theoretically mature enough then to become the secretary of an IC section. This involved taking responsibility for not only Sri Lanka, but the Indian sub-continent as a whole. And this was no accident. Comrade Keerthi had shown from the very beginning an intense interest in studying the historical experiences of the working class and drawing the necessary conclusions from them.”

Dias recalled many of the experiences of the RCL under Keerthi’s leadership, including the political struggle he waged to clarify the petty bourgeois nature of the politics and perspective of the JVP, and his principled response to the political differences that arose with the former British section of the ICFI in 1971.

Opportunities were opening up for the SEP and the ICFI, Dias emphasised, to politically penetrate deep into the working class and youth in Sri Lanka and internationally under conditions where they were entering into growing struggles against war and militarism and for their basic rights. He concluded by urging those in attendance to recognise their own responsibilities in this decisive political situation by joining the SEP and taking forward the struggle to build the ISSE.

In a clear demonstration of the warm response to the meeting, more than 18,000 rupees (\$US165)—a considerable amount in Sri Lankan terms—was raised for the party’s development fund. Many books were also sold, including 46 copies of Keerthi’s book on the JVP. Its third edition was released to coincide with his memorial meeting.



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