SEP-ISSE memorial meeting in Colombo

WSWS speaks to workers and youth about Keerthi Balasuriya

Our correspondents
28 December 2007

WSWS correspondents spoke with a number of people attending the recent public meeting held by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka to mark twenty years since the death of Keerthi Balasuriya. Keerthi was general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, from its founding until his sudden death from a massive heart attack on December 18, 1987. He played a leading role in the post-war international Trotskyist movement. We publish below interviews with participants in the Colombo memorial meeting.

Shanaka, 16, a young school student from Chilaw in the northwestern province, told the WSWS: "Your party is very different from other parties because you do what others don't. You ask us what we think; you encourage us to think; and you're open to the problems of workers, youth and students.

"As I learnt from the speeches, Comrade Keerthi took responsibility for the leadership of the RCL at a very young age and his work is an immense motivation for young people like us. The lesson that youth can draw from his life is that this party must be built in the coming period.

"I have started reading articles from your web site, which are inspiring. People are facing lots of problems due to price increases. We have some facilities at our school that are relatively OK, but most schools have no facilities.

"Political power is swinging from one party to the other—the United National Party to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party—but we have to show the correct path. I think the SEP has outlined that path and we have a responsibility to explain this to working people and youth."

Prasanna, a young teacher from Bandaragama, said: "I now know that Comrade Keerthi fought unconditionally for the truth. The inspiration that I take from his life is that we should take up this task and base ourselves on the historical knowledge for which he struggled. I have decided to join the SEP."

Priyantha, a lecturer from the University of Colombo, commented: "I believe that the contemporary problems facing mankind can only be solved through socialism. After listening to the speeches on Comrade Keerthi's struggle to build the party, I thoroughly understand how unrelenting and firm we have to be in that struggle. I also understand that we must study continuously, in order to grasp the historical necessity of socialism. I now really feel that Keerthi still lives among us.

Gunatileka, 69, whojoined the RCL as a transport worker in the state-run bus service in the late 1960s, said: "I joined the RCL just two months after its founding conference. Although I joined as a transport worker, I came from a peasant family background.

"Whilst I agreed with the party's political line against the SLFP [Sri Lanka Freedom Party]-LSSP [Lanka Sama Samaja Party] bourgeois coalition government, I was confused about how to solve the problems of the poor peasants and which class would play the leading role in a revolution. I was reading the Maoist newspaper, *Kamkaruwa* (Worker). That complicated matters, because they talked about workers but insisted that the peasantry should play the leading role.

"I had a number of discussions with Comrade Keerthi about this question. He had a remarkable ability to convince, and after some initial discussions I was in full agreement with him that the leading role belonged to the working class, which had to rally the support of the peasants by defending their rights. I had a thirst for more discussion because he had a thorough grasp of the Theory of Permanent Revolution. This was very important because there were many peasant struggles at the time.

"I have so many things to say about Keerthi, but will give you just a few instances. He made clear the need for a revolutionary party for the working class, which was the fundamental revolutionary force in capitalist society. He also explained how the Pabloite revisionists, which rejected the political independence of the working class, paved the way for the LSSP betrayal.

"Because the party was campaigning against the SLFP-LSSP-CP [Stalinist Communist Party] coalition, the LSSP leaders were thoroughly against us. In 1969, when I attended the All-Ceylon United Motor Workers Union conference as a delegate, the LSSP union leadership attempted to throw me out, branding me as an "enemy"—an enemy of what they called the "Unity Front". Former LSSP leader N.M. Perera was there as the chief guest. But they did not succeed, because we were based on the party perspectives.

"It is sad that Keerthi was only able to live a mere two years after the 1985-86 split in the ICFI. He played a leading role after joining comrade David North against the renegade Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) leaders Mike Banda, Healy and Slaughter. Comrade North addressed one of our party meetings and we were able to more deeply grasp what a world party is.

"Keerthi had a great personal concern for party comrades. I was thrown out of my job, as many comrades were, for participating in the 1980 general strike, and had to return to my hometown to do farming. When he met us the first thing he would ask about was our living conditions. At the same time, if there were any signs of political retreat among us, he unconditionally fought against it."

A **European student** who attended the meeting, but wanted to

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remain anonymous, told the WSWS: “I was angry about the present social setup and various happenings around the world. I had some understanding that socialism was the only alternative but was disillusioned by the attitudes of some of those parties claiming to be socialist. Despite this I never lost the view that society had to be changed.

“I heard from a lecturer in Sri Lanka that, ‘We cannot expect a radical cure for the diseases due to malnutrition, but only through proper treatment. Class society based on extracting profits impregnated with worriment, anxiety and tension is one of the great hindrances to curing these sorts of problems. So the fight to change society is not isolated from the fight for the eradication of social diseases.’ These words had a big impression on me.

“After attending the meeting I felt an inexpressible happiness. I was impressed with the dedication of the leadership and members in translating the entire meeting into Tamil and, even though I was only a single person, it was also translated to me in English.

“It seems to me that the contribution by Keerthi Balasuriya, the founder general secretary of the party, at such a very young age, has been immense. Speakers were able to touch only few examples, I think. The late leader was able to analyse because he was armed with Trotskyism. I hope that the party takes the necessary steps to publish his book [on the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna)] into other languages so that young people around the world can take guidance from it.

“I was also very impressed by the speech given by Keerthi’s life partner [Vilani Peiris] when she described the role he played in the party. With the knowledge I’ve gathered from this meeting, I can now begin to understand what is going on around the world and how to change it.”

Buddhika, an engineer employed in the private sector, explained: “After listening to Comrade Wije’s speech, especially on the history of the RCL, I now realise the importance of the theoretical and political struggle to build the revolutionary party. It is not only relevant for the party itself, but for the fate of mankind. For example, if under Keerthi’s leadership we had not opposed the Indian invasion into Bangladesh in 1971, then we could not oppose the Sri Lankan military intervention in the North and East. I think the same stand is expressed in our opposition to the war on Iraq.

“It is fascinating to learn about the youth who formed the RCL in opposition to the betrayal of the LSSP in 1964. If there had not been a struggle against Pabloism, the SEP could not have been formed. After listening to the speeches, I also found out about the importance of the struggle for principles in the building of the party and am attracted to Lenin’s stand that without theoretical struggle there can be no revolutionary party.

“When I listen to various intellectuals on television I see so many contradictions in their comments about political events. But as this meeting revealed there were no contradictions between comrade Keerthi’s stand on one issue or another. This also testifies in another way to the principled character of the SEP.”

K. Malini, 57, a longtime RCL and SEP sympathiser from Ambalangoda in the southern province, told the WSWS:

“I knew Comrade Keerthi for a long time but was more closely associated with him in the last five years of his life. When we were in Tangalle, about 200 km south of Colombo, he came to our home for a political discussion organised by my husband. He was very polite and friendly and always patient.

“I heard him at meetings and was always curious to listen to his speeches when he came to our area. His explanations influenced us powerfully. I remember that he had an ability to foresee the future more than other comrades and I very much liked his voice and his way of explaining serious problems. I was shocked when I heard that he had died.

“I repeatedly quoted from him when I was a student and in arguing against the positions of JVP sympathisers. He had attractive humane qualities. I went for discussions with Vilani, Keerthi’s partner, at the house they were staying in Colombo. The atmosphere was different and friendly and during these discussions Keerthi would often bring us tea. These are not small things, especially in a country where male chauvinism is expressed in various backward customs. His premature death was a terrible loss.

Sasikaran, 30, a Tamil, said: “Due to the insecure situation in Jaffna I came to Colombo about eight years ago. I gave up my university studies with the intention of going abroad, but after arriving was confronted with a lot of harassment during the routine search operations and was unable to go overseas.

“Living in Jaffna I believed that ordinary Sinhalese people were as cruel as the military. But during my stay in Colombo I learned that this is not so.

“After attending this meeting I can see that there is a politically strong movement striving for the unity of all sections of the community. The meeting explained how the SEP continues to defend its fight for equal rights for every citizen. I realise that the late leader contributed much more than what was quoted here, but if this is brought to Tamil youth like me they will know what they need to do to get rid of oppression.

“I found out about the party only recently and have had the opportunity to read some of its publications. I think Keerthi’s work on the JVP should also be translated into Tamil.

“I once believed that the 1983 communal riots were the main reason for the civil war, but I now understand that racial discrimination has been used to divide the Sinhala and Tamil masses since Sri Lankan independence.

“I hope that the people of the south, who are now suffering from the high cost of living and other attacks, will come into struggle very soon. With the war in the North the price of essential goods is high and people are undergoing immense hardship.

“As your party says, this war cannot be stopped by any government, whichever party comes to power in the present set up. The only way forward is through a unified struggle of Tamils and Sinhalese for socialism. The LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] calls for support from the international powers but I now realise that only the RCL, and now the SEP, has had a consistent policy against the war.”

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