Paris meeting commemorates the life and work of Keerthi Balasuriya

Our correspondent
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The International Committee of the Fourth International held a meeting in Paris on March 16 to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the death, aged 39, of Sri Lankan Trotskyist leader Keerthi Balasuriya.

The meeting was addressed by Chris Marsden of the British Socialist Equality Party, Amuthan, the chief editor of the Tamil page of the *World Socialist Web Site*, and Peter Schwarz, secretary of the ICFI and a leader of the German SEP.

Chairing the meeting, Athiyan, a leading member of the ICFI in France's Tamil community, said that Keerthi's struggle is a source of inspiration to the younger generation throughout the world and took as an example of this the young Tamil Trotskyist leader, Raveenthiranathan Senthil Ravee, who died tragically a year ago in a motoring accident at the age of 37.

Marsden detailed the role of the Trotskyists of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India, who, basing themselves on the theory of the permanent revolution developed by Trotsky, had led the fight in the 1940s for the emancipation of Sri Lanka, then called Ceylon, from British colonialism. Its Ceylonese unit, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), fought for this struggle to be led by the working class across ethnic and religious divisions, with a perspective of overthrowing all forms of oppression and the construction of socialism. Their struggle against the racist constitution imposed by British imperialism, which denied the Tamil minority of citizenship and official recognition of their language, put them at the head of mass struggles, notably the hartal (general strike) in 1953.

"Tragically," said Marsden, "this was to prove to be the high point of the LSSP's principled political struggle." The party successively adapted itself to the parliamentary framework, to nationalism and to communalism, a process bound up with the growth of centrist and revisionist tendencies inside the Fourth International, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel.

Marsden recounted the series of betrayals of the LSSP leadership which are responsible for the division of the Tamil workers and peasants from the majority Sinhala population and the descent into the 25 years of continuing civil war that began with the 1983 pogroms.

"It is only in light of this development that one can truly appreciate the significance of Keerthi Balasuriya and others who remained true to Trotskyism," Marsden said. "Their forces were small, but the stand they took was of inestimable and world historic importance.... Without their political stand then, the reputation of socialism and of Trotskyism would have forever afterwards laboured under the weight of the LSSP's political treachery."

"On every front, Keerthi sought to defend the political independence and historic interests of the working class," Marsden explained. "When the political crisis within the then British section of the ICFI, the Workers Revolutionary Party, came to a head in 1985, he played a central role in the struggle waged by the International Committee to restore and renew the perspective of Trotskyism."

Before he died tragically of a heart attack in December 1987, Keerthi was involved in intensive programmatic work seeking to understand the political implications of the unprecedented development of globalised production for the prospects for social revolution and, on this basis, "to draw a balance sheet of the historic experience of the working class with bourgeois nationalist movements and the nominally independent states created under the auspices of the national bourgeoisie."

"Through these discussions, the ICFI came to the conclusion that the separatist and communalist movements of the present period represent a response by the regional and ethnically based bourgeoisie seeking to liberate themselves from existing centralised states only in order to secure their own right to exploit the working class and essential natural resources and in this way make their relations with the major powers and transnational corporations.

"Such movements have no genuinely democratic or anti-imperialist content. They are antithetical to the struggle of the working class to unify itself internationally and to end the division of the world into antagonistic capitalist nation states, which is the only genuine basis for ending imperialist oppression."

In this way, Marsden concluded, Keerthi's life and work is now "part of the warp and woof of the revolutionary socialist canon—the essential historically derived program and perspective for the liberation of humanity from class oppression."

Amuthan spoke of the time when, as a refugee from the anti-Tamil pogroms and strongly influenced by concepts of national liberation, but disillusioned in the bourgeois nationalist parties he had fought with, he had first met Keerthi at an ICFI international school in Germany. "I was new to the party. On the very first day Keerthi came to me during the lunch break.... Our discussion was centred on the political situation in Sri Lanka and India and the character of the national groups. Both countries agreed to sign the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord in 1987, which had a vast political impact on the Indian subcontinent. The reactionary character of the national bourgeois in the underdeveloped countries once more came into the light."

Amuthan recalled that at the time the ICFI was not well known among Tamils. "Now 20 years later we have established a solid political authority for an international socialist perspective among the Tamil community in Europe."

All the Tamil nationalist groups, some claiming to be socialist, had agreed to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord: "This resulted in enormous political confusion among the Tamil population in Europe. Sections of youth who opposed this pact left these movements. However, an alternative political perspective was absent."

Keerthi "explained the class character of these movements and their relationship to the working class," Amuthan said. "He pointed out that their capitulation to the Indian government was a logical consequence of their capitalist perspective. They relied more on the assistance of the Indian bourgeoisie than the Tamil masses. Their perspective is limited to achieving the exclusive right to exploit the workers and masses. This is

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the opposite of a genuine struggle for democratic rights.

"He insisted that the fulfilment of democratic rights could only be realised through a socialist revolution and explained the perspectives of the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI."

Amuthan told the meeting that Keerthi, one month before he died, had "worked closely with his international co-thinkers on the statement of the International Committee on the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord." The Tamil version of the "Situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the RCL" (Revolutionary Communist League, predecessor of the present Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, the Socialist Equality Party) was one of the most discussed documents among the politically conscious youth in the late 1980s. In Europe, the sections of the International Committee won a significant number of Tamil members and supporters.

The nature of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the bourgeois nationalist group leading the armed struggle for a separate state in the Tamil north of the island, had been clearly revealed: "The transformation of the LTTE from claiming to be the 'freedom fighters' to a privileged elite became more transparent with the signing of the cease-fire agreement in 2002. Business expansions and investment plans became the political agenda of its representatives and middlemen, causing the exile community to withdraw their support."

Amuthan said that Tamil nationalism was rapidly losing ground among the Tamils in the Western countries. "The war in Iraq, unemployment, social inequality and the struggle of the students and workers in the countries they live in have had an impact on their political thinking. They no longer consider that the solution to the democratic aspirations of the Tamil masses can be realised through the narrow conception of forming a tiny capitalist state in Tamil areas."

Peter Schwarz told the meeting, "Keerthi conducted his political work in an epoch in which the combined betrayals of Social Democracy, Stalinism and Pabloism weighed heavily on the working class and the Trotskyist cadre of the International Committee remained relatively isolated.

"But he was convinced that the inherent contradictions of world capitalism would evoke a new period of revolutionary mass struggles, and that the fate of theses struggles would entirely depend on the existence of a revolutionary leadership, trained and steeled in the lessons of the struggle against Pabloism."

"The two years between the split with the WRP and Keerthi's premature death on December 18, 1987 were undoubtedly the most fruitful of his political life. He made a substantial contribution to the hundreds of pages of documents produced by the International Committee during and after the split.... They laid the foundations for the vast theoretical, political and organisational achievements made by the International Committee over the last two decades— in particular for the development of the *World Socialist Web Site* as the authentic voice of international Marxism."

The insoluble crisis of the world financial system sparked off by the subprime credit crunch, the debacle of US imperialism in Iraq and the battle for global hegemony between the great powers "will inevitably lead to new wars and a revival of ferocious class struggles," Schwarz explained. "Comrade Keerthi spent his entire life preparing the working class for these inevitable battles to come."

He reminded the meeting that we will soon be celebrating the 40th anniversary of the May-June 1968 uprising in France, "the biggest revolutionary movement in the advanced capitalist countries in the postwar period.... Here in France, more than 10 million workers went on a general strike that could only be brought under control by the betrayal of the Stalinist Communist Party."

This was part of a massive movement which swept the world in the early 1970s. The bourgeoisie's counteroffensive involved the abandonment of "the Keynesian economic policies, which constituted the basis of the social compromise of the postwar period. It lifted national regulations on trade and finance and opened the floodgates for a process known as globalisation. This was accompanied by a massive attack on the working class, epitomised by the smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers union by US President Ronald Reagan and the defeat of the British miners strike by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher."

The response of the old reformist labour organisations was to abandon their previous attempts to organise social compromise within the framework of the nation state and to instead impose "massive attacks on the working class in order to keep their national bourgeoisie competitive on the global market."

As for the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and China, "Globalisation exposed the fraudulent nature of their claim that socialism can be built in a single country, in the framework of a single nation state."

"Globalisation and the end of the Cold War have also exposed the complete bankruptcy of the petty-bourgeois nationalist organisations," Schwarz continued. Deprived of the possibility of manoeuvring between Moscow and Washington, "they have given up their anti-imperialist pretensions and are vying for the support of Washington or another imperialist power.... They are all looking for a deal with imperialism that allows them to be junior partners in the exploitation of their 'own' working class."

A Tamil statelet in the north of Sri Lanka "would be a pliant tool for the intrigues of imperialism in the region. No democracy is possible on such a basis."

Schwarz warned the meeting that the aggressive foreign policy of the US and the growing conflicts and militarization of the rival great powers were creating a situation resembling the lead-up to the First World War. "The question is now: Will imperialism plunge mankind into a new, nuclear and possibly fatal world war—or will the international working class prevent this by overthrowing capitalism and building society on a higher, socialist foundation?"

He drew attention to the resurgence of the class struggle all over Europe and asked: "But who will provide the working class with a perspective? The Social Democratic, Socialist and Communist parties, who have constantly been moving to the right over the last 40 years? The trade unions, who have betrayed struggle after struggle and who are acting as a police force of the management amongst workers? Or those who glorified Mao Zedong, Yasser Arafat and the Sandinistas yesterday and are glorifying Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales today? Does anyone seriously think that a military officer like Chavez, who is giving out some hand-outs to the masses from Venezuela's huge oil income, can provide a solution to the problems facing the international working class?"

"Only the International Committee of the Fourth International has a perspective, which is firmly based on an analysis of the world situation and the historical experiences of the 20th century," Schwarz said. "We fight for the independent mobilisation of the working class under the banner of socialist internationalism."

"Honouring the legacy of Keerthi means educating the younger generation in the history and the lessons drawn from the strategic experiences of the working class ... lessons and principles embodied in the ICFI."

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