

Commemoration of the first anniversary of the death of Raveenthiranathan Senthil Ravee held in Paris.

Our reporter
3 March 2008

A gathering was held on February 24 in La Courneuve, in the north Paris suburbs, to mark the first anniversary of the death of Raveenthiranathan Senthil Ravee (Senthil), a member of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). He was killed in a car accident in the early hours of February 28, 2007 on the London-bound M20 motorway. Born on October 12, 1969, in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, Senthil belonged to a generation that paid a heavy price for the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which took the liquidationist politics of Pabloite revisionism to its logical conclusion and joined the capitalist government of Madam Bandaranaike's Sri Lankan Freedom Party in 1964.

Some 150 family members, friends and comrades, from France and also travelling from Germany, England and Switzerland, took part in the memorial gathering, accompanying Senthil's father Arumugam Raveenthiranathan, his mother Raveenthiranathan Rasamma, his wife Anparasi and their children Turphin, Ajann and Leon and his elder sister Mrs Ratnaraja Karunathevi.

Those attending spanned three generations, but the majority were in their 20s and 30s.

Although it was a family occasion, those who attended supported the political struggle Senthil had carried out. The problems of the life of an émigré refugee diaspora, driven from its homeland by civil war and persecution, had made it difficult for people to have full knowledge of Senthil's contribution to the struggle to give an orientation to his people and to integrate them into the world movement of opposition to the ravages of imperialism. In discussion with them during the occasion, it was evident that they came because they wanted to better understand it and know more about what he fought for.

Letters of greetings from Chris Marsden, secretary of the British Socialist Equality Party, and Peter Schwarz, secretary of the ICFI, were read out. They expressed sympathies for the pain caused to the family, friends and comrades on the tragic death of one so young.

Chris Marsden, emphasising that "we in Britain cherish as our own" Senthil's wife and children, wrote: "Senthil was a substantial figure—someone who exuded a quiet confidence and authority. This was because he was moved by deeply-held convictions—convictions that were the product of his own bitter experiences with the nationalist movement in Sri-Lanka and the political education he received on this basis by the Trotskyist movement.

"He was amongst the first of a generation of young Tamils that today are leading the struggle for socialist internationalism and the unity of the world's workers—in Sri Lanka itself, in the Indian sub-Continent and amongst the émigré population in Europe.

Moreover, as has become ever clearer, his role in developing a cadre largely recruited from those forced into exile as a result of the terrible

tragedy inflicted upon the Tamil masses continues to have a powerful impact on the development of the International Committee and its influence in the French, British and German working class.

"That is something for which Senthil will continue to be honoured and for which not only his comrades, but all who knew him should share a sense of pride. There are people with you today who owe Senthil a great deal, for whom he was both a fellow fighter and a political mentor. He was proud of them, just as we are so very proud of him."

Peter Schwarz wrote: "One year after Senthil's death it is still hard to grasp that we have lost him. He was working with us for 15 years, always present, reliable and determined.

"Senthil's life had a meaning, because he was fighting for an aim. He was deeply convinced that there can be a better future for mankind, if the working class overcomes national divisions and unites in a common international struggle for socialism. He was a convinced socialist and internationalist." He said that "Senthil's name will always be remembered and cherished by the International Committee."

There were addresses from comrades, friends and family members paying tribute to Senthil and making an assessment of the significance and relevance of his life. Amuthan, chief editor of the Tamil page of the WSWs, presiding over the occasion, said in his opening remarks: "To honour Senthil is to carry forward the importance and correctness of his perspective for which he fought among the world working class."

Amuthan stressed: "If one were to understand Senthil's life, experience and the political situation he was facing, we should view the events in Sri Lanka not from a nationalist point but from an internationalist standpoint. The internal political developments in Sri Lanka were shaped by the changes in world imperialist centres and changes in Stalinist bureaucratic centres: certainly they were not the outcome of the subjective personal likes and dislikes of local leaders. The Sinhala and Tamil leaders are no exception to this."

He recalled that "when Senthil came towards our movement over a decade ago, the questions he raised were so important for the working class, peasants and oppressed masses in the former colonies: How to bring about peace in Sri Lanka permanently?, How to stop war?, Why has it not been possible for Sinhalese-Tamil working class to come together and fight for their rights without nationalist, racist divisions?, What is our perspective with reference to national liberation struggles?, Why did Soviet Union come to this tragic end?, etc.

"Senthil was not one to accept anything easily. For over three years we had discussions over these issues.

"He came to the firm conclusion that the struggle to resolve the unresolved problems of the democratic rights of Tamil people is inseparably linked with the struggle for uniting the working class in the Indian sub-continent in the struggle for socialism and that as a part of this

the Tamil and Sinhalese working-class and oppressed people must be united in a common struggle against their own native bourgeoisie and their imperialist masters.

“Our task to defend the Tamil people against the oppression of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie never depends upon the programmes and policies of national liberation movements. The task of our perspective is not to form separate petty nation states for each nationality. On the contrary, our perspective has been to unite, independently of their national bourgeoisies, workers and students worldwide to overthrow the outdated capitalist nation-state system.”

Amuthan concluded: “It is for this historical responsibility that Senthil had dedicated himself. He will be remembered forever as the fighter who fought for a socialist, international perspective.”

Stephane Hugues, speaking for the ICFI in France, gave an account of the fifteen years of his work with Senthil: “I first met Senthil in the spring of 1992 in a small park by the boulevard Sebastopol in Paris. Senthil had been through the Indo-Sri Lanka accord and the betrayal of the Tamil national movements. He understood that the bourgeois nationalist movement was bankrupt, but he did not know why.

“In discussing with the ICFI, he began to understand the historical questions and he turned to the program of Trotskyism. At the centre of this perspective was the theory of the permanent revolution which Trotsky developed in 1905/6 reviewing the 100 years of history since the French Revolution. The theory acknowledged that the bourgeoisie had been a revolutionary class and had led the English and then the French revolutions. Trotsky was able to show that since then, in the revolutions in France in 1830, throughout Europe in 1848, and the Paris Commune of 1871, the role of the bourgeoisie had changed profoundly. From a revolutionary class that led national revolutions they had become the exploiters and oppressors of the working class and peasantry. The bourgeoisie now defended the status quo rather than fighting for democracy and rights for all.

“Trotsky, basing himself on Marx, understood capitalism as a global system. The theory of the permanent revolution considered the role of the bourgeoisie on a global basis. In both backward and advanced countries the bourgeoisie was incapable of fighting for the toiling masses. Thus, in Russia the bourgeoisie was impotent and incapable of leading its own bourgeois revolution. Only the working class, fighting on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program, could lead anti-feudal and anti-colonial struggles even if it was a small minority as in Sri Lanka.

“Today, democracy and well-being can only be achieved on a global level.

“Once Senthil understood this, the crisis of bourgeois nationalism became much clearer. The LTTE was incapable of addressing these issues. It was too concerned about its relationship with the Indian, the European and the US bourgeoisies. The LTTE served the selfish interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie just as Rajapakse’s Sri Lankan government served the interests of the Sinhala bourgeoisie.

“Now, even the most radical and once respected nationalist movements, such as the PLO, are discredited. The question of political perspectives was essential. Senthil grasped this. He understood that the only viable perspective was one based on the international working class and the fight to overthrow the whole system: capitalism was at the end of the road and was historically bankrupt. Only the working class can break the stranglehold of the whole capitalist system on the world’s population.

“To do this, the working class must be conscious of this historical necessity: that is the role of our party and the WSWS. I’m saying this because that is what he would want us to understand. If he had been here today, Senthil would have been telling you this. Thus, the meeting in the little park in 1992 was the most important in his life.”

Athiyan, a leading member of the ICFI in the Tamil community in France, told the gathering that to honour Senthil’s memory they were

publishing a book detailing his life. He stressed that “In this era of integrated globalized economy, he understood scientifically that a true liberation of oppressed Tamil people in Sri Lanka would not be possible by forming a small Tamil state. Senthil’s answer was that there was a revolutionary perspective: that is none other than the perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International.”

Athiyan posed the question: “What do the aggressions on Afghanistan and Iraq and threat to Iran by American Imperialism teach us? It makes the whole of humanity confront the next great disaster for mankind. In this imperialist epoch the solution for this crisis lies in the development of the political consciousness of the world working class and the building of its own party. To continue its exploitation capitalism has divided the working class through race, religion, caste, colour and other differences and has subjected them within national boundaries.”

“Senthil understood, in particular, that the perspective of Tamil nationalism was just a trap for Tamil people and was firm on the need to develop a perspective for the people of the Indian subcontinent. So long as the Indian and other world imperialist powers which support the racist government in Sri Lanka are not overthrown, there will be no liberation of oppressed people in Sri Lanka. It is in this struggle that Senthil stands tall as an internationalist.”

Chezian, a close friend and comrade of Senthil, and who had been with him when he was killed, told the gathering: “When myself and Senthil moved towards the Marxist movement, the problem that confronted us was to find out the causes for the collapse of Soviet Union, the bankruptcy of Tamil nationalist movements in Sri Lanka. Also we had a question on what basis the true liberation of the oppressed people could be attained. When we got the clarity in these questions, we joined the ICFI.”

Chezian recalled “Till the last minute Senthil was constantly thinking about the future of mankind. He was deeply committed to his convictions. He fondly remembered those who shaped him. Till our vehicle met with an accident, he was talking about how to build our party in the Indian sub-continent. He will live with us through every one of our successes.”

Senthil’s cousin, acknowledging the grief of his comrades in struggle, asked “How can I, who knew him from his very childhood, forget him? I knew him when his mother was carrying him. From his childhood he was very honest. He always listened patiently. His demise was a great loss.” She put great value on the Tamil cultural heritage and pointed out that “History records that Sri Lanka got separated from India about 6,000 years ago. Similarly Tamil is a very old language. It is said that once it was spoken up to the Himalayas. It has been a spoken language for 50,000 years and a written language for 3,000 years.”

She said “To survive as a person one must help others; that is socialism.” She proposed “We should create a trust to protect his wife and children.”

Kanda said that he had had a strong friendship with Senthil for over 20 years. Senthil was in opposition to the immense inequality in the world: “In 1997 the richest one fifth of the world’s population received 86 percent of world income, with the poorest fifth receiving just 1.3 percent. More than 1.3 billion people are forced to subsist on less than \$1 per day—a life-threatening situation.” In order to solve this crisis Senthil “was very much convinced by the perspective of permanent revolution. So he fought for the world socialist revolution which is the only solution for the working class to free itself from the sufferings of social polarization existing on a world scale. So he proudly joined in the ICFI and fought for the world socialist perspective.”

The addresses were followed by a meal, and in discussions there was a lively interest in the theory of permanent revolution. People were particularly in agreement with Stephane Hugues’s observation that the LTTE leadership represented the selfish interests of the Tamil bourgeoisie and the Rajapakse government those of a tiny privileged Sinhala elite and not those of the mass of the Sri Lankan people.

Talking with Senthil's father, after the ceremony, he said that he was not politically involved. He had always encouraged Senthil to read. He himself had started to read some of Senthil's books. He said that there were many religions: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, but it was necessary to meditate and bring out what was scientific in them. He thought that the Fourth International was very important.

He had been the principal of a school and is now retired. He had not known about Trotskyism: if he had he would not have let his students go to the nationalists, but he had not been aware that there was an alternative.

There was a situation of civil war in the north of Sri Lanka but he thought that it was essential that the people there should have contact with the outside world. For this we had to find a way of bringing the WSWs into the civilian population and translate it into all languages for people all over the world.

The memorial gathering had really showed who Senthil was, he said. Senthil's father reads the WSWs all the time and has already read the first two chapters of Trotsky's "Third International after Lenin" which has been translated for the first time into Tamil by the Tamil WSWs editorial board to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the death of Keerthi Balasuriya. This has made him very proud of his son's achievements. He said that he would prepare a report on Senthil's development for the fifth anniversary of his death.

In discussion, Amuthan pointed out that the people at the gathering had experienced 25 years of deaths in their families and communities. News has just come in that a comrade from the Sri Lankan SEP has lost 8 members of his family due to an indiscriminate bombing raid carried out by the Sri Lankan air force in LTTE-held territory.

However, they recognised that the death of Senthil was a particular tragedy and loss because of the struggle that he had been carrying out. Many said that they would be attending the March 16 meeting in Paris commemorating the 20th anniversary of Keerthi Balasuriya's death.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact