

On the 20th anniversary of his death

# SEP general secretary pays tribute to Keerthi Balasuriya

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*The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the World Socialist Web Site will hold a meeting in Paris on March 16 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the death of Keerthi Balasuriya, general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, and a leader of the ICFI.*

*The following speech was delivered by Wije Dias, general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka), to a commemorative meeting in Colombo last December. Keerthi was general secretary of the RCL from its founding in 1968 until his sudden death from a massive heart attack on December 18, 1987.*

*A report of the SEP meeting in Colombo is posted here, with interviews from participants, and greetings from other sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International read to the meeting.*

As leading comrades of the world Trotskyist movement have said in their greetings, the death of comrade Keerthi Balasuriya was a serious loss, not just for the Revolutionary Communist League and the working class in Sri Lanka and the Indian subcontinent, but for the international working class as a whole. I would like to draw your attention to another point mentioned in almost every message. It was only after the split in the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1985-86, led by comrade David North, the secretary of the Workers League in the US, that the leading members of the ICFI had an opportunity to learn about comrade Keerthi and his profound political contributions to Trotskyism.

While feeling deep sorrow at losing comrade Keerthi at the relatively young age of 39, we were fortunate to have had his intimate political guidance for more than two decades. During that period we fought alongside comrade Keerthi, learnt from him and learnt with him to prepare ourselves for the struggle to resolve the crisis of leadership of the working class and through that to liberate mankind.

Before 1985, the International Committee functioned under the political leadership of its British section—the Socialist Labor League (SLL), which later became the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). This party gained great respect from IC cadres due to its struggle to defend the Trotskyist program of the Fourth International against the revisionism of the Pablo-Mandel tendency. In the 1970s, however, under conditions of the WRP's nationalist degeneration, its leadership of Gerry Healy, Michael Banda and Cliff Slaughter blocked any close political collaboration between the ICFI sections. They feared any challenge to their retreat from the theory of Permanent Revolution and their adaptation to the national bourgeois regimes of the Middle East and to the labour bureaucracies. The WRP manoeuvred to keep leading members from the IC sections apart in order to prevent any comparing of notes on the political problems they confronted and any discussion of programmatic issues.

The two years after the 1985 split and the reorganisation of the IC as a

genuine international party were Keerthi's happiest days. They were also the most productive period of his political life because he poured all his energy into making valuable political contributions within the international socialist movement. When we turn the pages of the IC's theoretical journal, the *Fourth International*, from volumes 12 to 15, we find a large number of articles produced by Keerthi, not to speak of the contributions he made to IC statements developed in collaboration with his international co-thinkers. In the preface to his book *The Heritage We Defend*, comrade David North pays this tribute: "A fearless opponent of opportunism, comrade Balasuriya played a decisive role in the struggle to defend the International Committee against the attacks of the Workers Revolutionary Party. He brought to this struggle a vast and penetrating knowledge of the history of the Fourth International and a keen understanding of the implications of the decades-long fight against Pabloite revisionism."

When we speak of the importance of Keerthi's work during the last two years of his life, we do not in any way underestimate the political contribution he made prior to 1985 as the general secretary of the RCL from the time of its founding.

Comrade Keerthi began his political career at the very young age of 17, while still studying for the advanced level exam. The political climate of the period was one of immense turmoil in Sri Lanka as well as throughout the Indian sub-continent. The radicalisation of students and youth was expressed in anger and hostility toward the great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which called itself Trotskyist but joined the bourgeois government of Madam Bandaranaike in 1964.

Under Bandaranaike, unemployment increased and education was cut. Her coalition government opened the door for the right-wing United National Party to return to power in 1965. In December of that year, student struggles erupted in every university across the country and the government unleashed the police to brutally suppress students at Peradeniya University in Kandy. During the same period, various petty-bourgeois political groups were formed among the unemployed rural youth under different names such as *Peradiga Sulang* (Winds of the East), *Gini Pupura* (Spark) etc. The organisation that later became the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was among them.

Keerthi Balasuriya started to work in 1966 with the *Shakti* group formed by graduates and undergraduates who had been in and around the LSSP (Revolutionary). The LSSP (R) had split from the LSSP in opposition to its entry into the Bandaranaike government. However, led by Edmond Samarakkody and Bala Tampoe, its political line was a mixture of trade union syndicalism and parliamentarism, which was not fundamentally different from the policies that led the LSSP to join the bourgeois coalition.

Many youth from the LSSP (R) broke from it out of sheer frustration.

Keerthi and those of us who joined the *Shakthi* group were keen to find the root causes for the 1964 betrayal and the stagnation of the LSSP (R). Yet the politics of the *Shakthi* group were centrist in character and carried the danger of drifting back toward coalitionism. This was exploited by V. Karalasingham and a few others to return to the LSSP under the pretext of carrying out entry work within it. A group of us, including Keerthi, opposed this bogus move and split from Karalasingham. Those who returned to the LSSP never stopped their "entry work" and instead settled down comfortably inside its bureaucracy, playing a most despicable role during the period of the second coalition government of 1970-75.

It was in the midst of this crisis inside the *Shakthi* group that the British section of the IC, the SLL, decided in 1966 to make another intervention. Gerry Healy had visited Sri Lanka in 1964 when the LSSP's stage-managed delegates' conference passed the resolution to join the Bandaranaike government. Healy's intervention to oppose the LSSP betrayal was courageous and principled and won a favorable response, particularly among the young people who later joined the *Shakthi* group.

In 1966, Tony Banda visited the island as a representative of the IC. He met several members of the LSSP(R) leadership who called themselves IC supporters. However, only one person of that older generation expressed his readiness to commit himself to the building of a section of the IC. That was Wilfred Pereira, known to everyone as Spike. When Banda came to know of the *Shakthi* group through Spike, he immediately decided to contact those members who had opposed reentry into the LSSP.

I recall how Tony Banda came to Baddegama, about 70 miles south of Colombo, where I lived. He had with him about six people, all packed into a small baby Austin car. They included Keerthi, along with comrades Nanda Wickramasinghe and Ananda Wakkumbura who are present here today. Banda brought us all in contact with comrade Spike. Spike had immense political experience going back to the days of the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of the 1940s, which pioneered the Trotskyist movement in Sri Lanka as a section of the Fourth International. He was an inspiration to us all.

We organised ourselves as the *Virodhaya* group and began to study the IC's political material that Banda had brought, particularly the struggle against the re-unification of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) of the US with the Pabloite International Secretariat in 1962-63. Those documents helped solve a big puzzle by making clear to us how the groundwork for the LSSP betrayal in 1964 was prepared by the Pabloite movement and why the LSSP (R), which refused to break with Pabloism, failed to develop a revolutionary perspective for the working class.

Banda also guided the *Virodhaya* group in its first-hand experience with the Pabloite revisionists. During that time the leader of the Pabloite organisation, Ernest Mandel, visited Sri Lanka and the *Virodhaya* group politically challenged him at public meetings he addressed at the Peradeniya campus and in Colombo.

The period before the founding of the Revolutionary Communist League in June 1968 was one of intense study within the *Virodhaya* group of the historical record of the IC, from its formation with the issuing of the Open Letter by SWP leader James P. Cannon in 1953. The Open Letter clarified for us all the essential theoretical and political differences between the Fourth International and Pabloite revisionism. The refusal of the LSSP to join the IC on the basis of that valuable document, made clear the LSSP's nationalist orientation and its turn away from the program of the Fourth International from the early 1950s. The LSSP's degeneration shed more light on the implications of the retreat of the SWP into the Pabloite camp in 1963. Like the LSSP, what was expressed in the SWP's characterisation of Castro's Cuba as a workers' state was an adaptation to the domination of the radical petty-bourgeoisie over the anti-imperialist struggles in the historically backward countries.

The study of this history was the indispensable political groundwork for the RCL's formation by comrade Spike and this group of young people.

That is why we always insist with youth today: it is essential to study the lessons of the struggle to defend the program of the Marxist movement. It is only through that study that they will be politically equipped to take their place as working class revolutionaries in the struggle to overthrow the existing imperialist world order and establish a socialist world.

Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya was unanimously elected as the general secretary of the RCL at its founding conference. He was not yet 20 years old. But in the course of the struggle to found the RCL, he had politically and theoretically matured and was prepared for the huge tasks that confronted the leader of an IC section, with responsibilities not only in Sri Lanka but the Indian sub-continent.

Keerthi's selection was no accident. From the outset, he was intensely preoccupied with political and theoretical issues, in a way that surpassed the rest of us. When we sat with him, walked with him or went to a shop for a cup of tea with him, he would always initiate a political discussion. His interests were broad, including an astonishing interest in approaching art through a Marxist analysis. In his two decades as the RCL's general secretary, he proved again and again the correctness of the decision at the founding congress to elect him.

Keerthi made a major theoretical contribution with his book, *The Politics and the Class Nature of the JVP*. It was not just a book written against the JVP. In a deeper sense, Keerthi regarded it as a book through which the cadre of the RCL would be educated and differentiated from radical petty-bourgeois movements. Its importance was underscored by the fact that the Pabloite LSSP (R) was, at the time, holding joint public meetings with the JVP, helping to dress up this anti-working class, petty bourgeois party in socialist colours.

Keerthi's analysis of the JVP's politics laid the basis for the RCL to understand more clearly its internationalist tasks beyond the confines of the nation state of one island, and to develop a perspective for the unification of working people throughout the Indian sub-continent in the struggle for socialism. This was graphically demonstrated in the Bangladesh liberation movement that broke out in 1971.

The RCL correctly understood that the Bangladesh struggle objectively challenged the artificial state system imposed on the sub-continent in 1947 by the British imperialists, with the connivance of the Hindu and Muslim bourgeoisie. The partition of India was aimed at distorting, dividing and destroying the genuine struggle to liberate the masses from colonialism that had been developing during World War II and its immediate aftermath. Our perspective was to oppose the rulers of both Pakistan and India on the basis of the theory of Permanent Revolution, and fight for a workers' and peasants' government in a reunified sub-continent that would resolve the outstanding democratic tasks and implement a socialist program.

The artificial character of the 1947 partition was obvious. Bangladesh, then called East Pakistan, was separated by thousands of miles from the Pakistani seat of power located in the west of the sub-continent. Bangladeshis rose up in 1971 to secede from the military rule of Yahya Khan based in Islamabad. That posed a serious political crisis for the Indian government as well. The Pakistani military invasion of what had been, prior to partition, East Bengal provoked an exodus of hundreds of thousands of refugees who poured into India's West Bengal. More fundamentally, the Indian ruling class feared that the struggle would unite Bengalis, undermine the 1947 communal division and threaten the Indian state. This danger was underscored by the fact that Maoist guerillas, who were opposed to the Indira Gandhi government in India, were crossing the border and joining Bangladeshi fighters, despite the support of the Maoist bureaucracy in China for the military regime in Pakistan.

Keerthi, after a discussion on the RCL political committee, drafted a statement on the Bangladesh crisis and the intervention of the Indian army into Bangladesh in December 1971. Firstly, the statement placed the events within their international context: "The breakup of the political

framework established by imperialism in the subcontinent is directly and intimately related to the ending of the long period of inflationary boom experienced by world capitalism during the past period, and the development of an economic and political crisis of unprecedented proportions opening up a period of revolutionary struggles on a global scale. The Bangladesh liberation struggle and the Indo-Pakistan war are the products of this new stage in the class struggle.”

The RCL then emphatically stated: “The Indian government’s intervention was a completely counterrevolutionary one. Under the fraudulent claim of supporting the Bangladesh struggle, it intervened to crush the development of a unified revolutionary Bengal and to set up a puppet regime in a castrated Bangladesh, confined to the east.” The statement insisted: “Only the program of the Fourth International of fighting for the setting up of a socialist republic which solves the national problems as well can show the masses the way forward.”

The statement ended with the following appeal: “The Ceylonese [Sri Lanka was then called Ceylon] Trotskyists appeal to all proletarian fighters, to the students and the youth, and to the peasant militants to unite on the basis of the founding program, the Transitional Program of the Fourth International. The rebirth of Trotskyism, expressed in the development in the FI through the battle against revisionism waged by the International Committee, commencing from 1953, has already commenced in Ceylon. This now needs imperatively and urgently to be extended to the mainland, to India and Pakistan.”

Before the RCL statement was published, however, we received a copy of the *Workers Press*, the daily publication of the British SLL, led by Healy, Banda and Slaughter. It contained a statement, published in the name of the IC, but without consulting any of its sections, that supported Indira Gandhi’s military intervention in Bangladesh. This was 180 degrees in opposition to the revolutionary policy advanced by the RCL.

Keerthi did not mince words in a letter immediately dispatched to the IC secretary Cliff Slaughter, saying: “It would be a political error with grave consequences to give support, critical or otherwise, to the government of Indira Gandhi and its policies. Our support for the Bengali people in their struggle to liberate themselves from the oppressors should not only go against Pakistan but also against the Indian ruling class.” The letter stated unambiguously: “It is not possible to support the national liberation struggle of the Bengali people and the voluntary unification of India on socialist foundations without opposing the Indo-Pakistan war”.

While accepting the discipline of the IC, Keerthi warned: “We believe that our defending the IC statement would create immense confusion inside the working class. It need not be stated that it is difficult to defend the IC statement. Nevertheless, clarity among the International is more important than anything else for it is impossible for us to build a national section without fighting to build the International.”

In taking this stance, the RCL was based upon a completely principled internationalist outlook. The struggle to build the world party of socialist revolution is the foremost task for every socialist. The perspectives and strategy of world socialist revolution can only be developed through the discussion and collaboration of international co-thinkers. Those are the principles of our movement, which should be grasped by everyone here today.

The Healy-Banda-Slaughter leadership of the SLL-WRP never forgave the RCL for its defence of Permanent Revolution in relation to the Bangladesh liberation struggle. Within a few months, the SLL intervened to change the RCL’s line on the national question. The RCL had, from its formation, defended the democratic rights of the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka on the basis of the classical Marxist position of the right to self-determination.

The rights of the Tamil people had been systematically trampled on by the Sri Lankan state established in 1948, starting with the abolition of citizenship rights for Tamil-speaking plantation workers, followed by

making Sinhala the only state language. The RCL’s defence of the right of the Tamil nation to a separate state had been the policy of the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI) in the 1940s and had been formally adhered to by the LSSP after the two parties amalgamated in 1950. The LSSP only abandoned the position after it entered the Bandaranaike government in 1964.

During the 1971 JVP-led youth uprising, the RCL was subjected to a state witch hunt for its principled opposition to the savage repression of JVP members. Its Sinhala and Tamil newspapers—*Kamkaru Puwath* and *Tholilalar Seithi* (Workers News)—were banned. Although the ban was never lifted, the RCL, when the situation eased, restarted its Sinhala and Tamil publications under different names—*Kamkaru Mawatha* (Workers Path) replaced *Kamkaru Puwath* and *Tholilalar Pathai* replaced *Tholilalar Seithi*.

In a statement published on June 24, 1972, the RCL declared: “We Marxists recognise the right of the Tamil nation to self-determination. At the same time, we emphasise that this right can only be won by mobilising the Sinhala and Tamil workers for the establishment of a workers and peasants government based on socialist policies and recognising this very same right.” The RCL program was based on the recognition that the fulfillment of the belated tasks of the democratic revolution and the achievement of the democratic rights denied to oppressed nations could be realised only as a part of the struggle for socialism under a workers and peasants government, that is the dictatorship of the working class supported by the oppressed masses. What the RCL argued for, as Trotsky explained in his theory of Permanent Revolution, was in opposition to the formalist view that the path to socialism had to be prepared by a long period of bourgeois democracy. Rather, the path to democracy in the historically backward countries, the RCL insisted, was through the dictatorship of the working class.

The British SLL intervened to force the RCL to abandon this principled revolutionary policy. Cliff Slaughter was sent to Sri Lanka at the end of 1972, to use his authority as IC secretary to demand the change. It was the one and only visit to Sri Lanka by Slaughter, even though he was the IC secretary for nearly two decades from the mid-1960s until 1985.

The political derailment of the RCL by the Healy-Banda-Slaughter leadership created immense political difficulties. By 1972, the RCL was in the forefront of the struggle in defence of the democratic rights of the Tamils against the new Bandaranaike coalition government. It was the only working class party to wage a vigorous campaign among workers and youth in opposition to the 1972 constitution, which enthroned Buddhism as the state religion alongside the Sinhala-only language policy.

Wickramabahu Karunaratne, leader of the opportunist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), continues to boast that he alone displayed black flags to oppose the 1978 constitution of then United National Party (UNP) President J.R. Jayawardene. But he, as a member of the LSSP, totally supported the 1972 constitution, which played a crucial role in laying the basis for the communal war that erupted in 1983. By contrast, the defence of Tamil rights enabled the RCL to penetrate deep into the working class. For instance, on the initiative of RCL members, the print workers union at the government press passed a resolution opposing the 1972 constitution and calling for a united struggle of Sinhala and Tamil workers against the coalition government and for a socialist alternative. These developments were drastically hampered by the SLL’s intervention. A large part of the responsibility lay with Mike Banda, who had become a staunch defender of the post-war state structures imposed throughout the South Asian region by imperialism in collaboration with the Stalinism.

Steeled in these bitter political experiences, Keerthi immediately supported comrade David North’s critique of the WRP’s policies as soon as he had a chance to read the documents in 1985. Comrade North exposed how the WRP, from the mid-1970s, had abandoned the lessons of the IC’s long struggle against Pabloism and adapted to bourgeois

movements and regimes in the Middle East and Africa, as well as to the union and Labour bureaucracies in Britain itself. His documents had been arbitrarily suppressed by the WRP leadership, suffering the same fate as the RCL's critique of the SLL's statement on Bangladesh.

The split from the WRP renegades in 1985-86 opened a new chapter in the political work of the IC. It was a decisive turn by the Trotskyist movement to politically prepare for the new stage of the international class struggle that was opening up as a result of the globalisation of production, which has undermining all forms of national economic regulation worldwide.

In relation to South Asia, Keerthi was closely involved in drafting the crucial IC statement, "The Situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the RCL", issued on November 19, 1987, just a month before his untimely death. Keerthi exposed the imperialist-instigated Indo-Sri Lanka Accord signed between Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Jayawardene as a conspiracy to use the Indian military to crush the Tamil struggle for their legitimate democratic rights. The IC statement called for the unity of "the Tamil and Sinhala workers in the struggle for a united socialist state of Eelam and Sri Lanka".

Distilled into the statement was all of Keerthi's theoretical work on the struggle of the RCL against the nationalist petty-bourgeois JVP and his analysis of the Bangladesh liberation struggle. Keerthi was acutely sensitive to the changing nature of such movements. Although it advanced the classical Marxist formula of the right to self-determination, the statement laid the basis for a discussion within the Trotskyist movement of the validity of such a demand in the contemporary world economic and political context. The globalisation of production has now rendered all nationally-based programs obsolete and dramatically altered the character of such national liberation struggles. Far from opposing imperialism, organisations like the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] today seek its support for the establishment of their own statelet to exploit the working class. The defence of the democratic rights of oppressed minorities is completely bound up with the struggle for the international unity of the working people, across nation state boundaries, on the basis of a socialist program.

The SEP continues the struggle of the RCL, led by Keerthi, for the defence of the democratic rights of the oppressed Tamils and for the unity of working people against capitalist rule. We offer a socialist alternative for the working class and youth, in opposition to both the resumed war and the fraudulent "peace process" promoted by the official opposition parties and various petty-bourgeois left groupings. President Rajapakse, who has intensified the war after narrowly winning power in November 2005, mimics Washington's bogus "war on terrorism", which is being waged to prosecute the predatory imperialist interests of the United States. Rajapakse and his JVP allies claim that the problems facing working people, youth and students can be looked at only after the war is won. They brand anyone who protests—workers, farmers or unemployed youth—as "agents of terrorism" and unleash the security forces against them. Their slogan is "war first and wages, jobs, subsidies and social welfare second".

This reminds us of the situation in Russia after the 1917 February revolution that brought to power a bourgeois government, supported by the Menshevik reformists and the petty-bourgeois Socialist Revolutionaries, who rode the wave of anti-Tsar and antiwar agitation. That provisional bourgeois government preached a similar sermon to Rajapakse: the social issues will be addressed only after winning the war. It denounced the Bolsheviks as agents of the German enemy. It was only eight months, however, before the provisional government, which neither ended the war nor resolved the social crisis, was overthrown by the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin and Trotsky.

In the coming period, class struggles will certainly grow, as the burdens of the war are imposed on the masses. We must politically arm ourselves

and educate broad layers of workers, students and the youth in the vital lessons of the history of the working class. That was the task to which Keerthi was dedicated. Waging that struggle is the most fitting tribute we can make today to his life as an international socialist.



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