

Sri Lankan Trotskyists mark 40 years of struggle for socialist internationalism

Our correspondents

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka held a public meeting in Colombo on July 16 to mark the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—the predecessor to the SEP. Around 150 people attended, including workers, young people, students and professionals from Colombo, along with others from the island's southern and northwestern provinces and the central plantation districts.

SEP political committee member K. Ratnayake, a founding member of the RCL, chaired the meeting. He pointed out that the meeting to mark the anniversary was not a ritualistic event. The program of Trotskyism, on which the RCL was founded, and the political lessons of its struggles over the past 40 years, are of decisive importance for the working class as it enters a new period of revolutionary upheaval in South Asia and internationally.

Ratnayake recalled that 40 years ago, on June 16-17, 1968, about 30 people gathered at the Workers Meeting Hall at Slave Island in Colombo to found the RCL, as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Ratnayake paid tribute to Keerthi Balasuriya, the RCL's founding general secretary, who from the party's inception until his untimely death in December 1987 made a unique contribution to the international Trotskyist movement.

Ratnayake explained: "The political crisis in South Asia takes an extreme expression in Sri Lanka under the rule of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. It has resumed the war in the North and East and intensified anti-Tamil communalism to divide and weaken the working class. Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution was at the heart of the discussion at the RCL conference to found the party against the Lanka Sama Samaja Party's (LSSP) betrayal in 1964 in joining the capitalist government of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike. This perspective 40 years later is the only alternative for the working class of the subcontinent."

Ratnayake read out greetings sent by David North, national secretary of the SEP (US) and chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*; and Nick Beams, national secretary of the SEP (Australia). Greetings were also presented from SEP comrades on the northern Jaffna peninsula, cut off by the renewed war, from the SEP's exile organisation in Europe, and from ICFI sympathisers in India.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias, also an RCL founding member, delivered the main lecture. He began by saying: "We are

proud to recall at this moment the 40-year struggle of the RCL. Though the numbers at the RCL founding congress and the meeting place were small, the decisions taken marked an important turning point for the working class not only in Sri Lanka, but also in South Asia and internationally."

He quoted from the political resolution adopted by RCL founding congress, which stated: "The RCL bases its work on the decisions of the first four congresses of the Communist International, the founding program of the Fourth International initiated by Leon Trotsky in 1938 and also the struggles waged by Trotsky himself in 1939-40 and by the ICFI in 1953 in opposition to the revisionist program that attempted to revise that program and thus liquidate the Fourth International in the later period."

Dias explained: "In other words, the RCL based itself on the essential theoretical foundations of the struggle for world socialist revolution waged throughout the whole twentieth century... When we mark 40 years of history of the RCL's struggle it is to explain the crucial importance of its Trotskyist perspective of socialist internationalism for the working class today."

None of the problems confronting the masses anywhere in the world could be comprehended without understanding the profound economic crisis in the US, the centre of world imperialism, Dias said. He pointed out that the Federal Reserve Board's bail out of mortgage giants Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac was the second time in just four months that the US government had intervened to rescue major firms and prevent an imminent collapse of the American and global financial system.

The speaker explained that the eruption of American militarism was an attempt by the US to utilise its residual military superiority to reverse the decline in its economic and political hegemony. The Bush administration's military interventionist policies had further intensified the instability and tensions in South Asia and many other parts of the world. "This turbulent political situation cannot be grasped without basing oneself on the strategic lessons of Trotskyism," he said.

Dias said that the basic contradictions of the capitalist system, between the globalised world economy and the outmoded nation-state system and between socialised production and the system of private property, were intensifying and bringing the danger of a third world war fought with nuclear weapons. The perspective of socialist internationalism, which was at the centre of the RCL's founding in 1968, provided the only way out for humanity.

Dias detailed the issues that the RCL founders had to grapple

with in the wake of the LSSP's betrayal in 1964. In particular, the RCL, under the guidance of the ICFI, traced the political roots of the LSSP's renunciation of Trotskyism and adaptation to nationalism to the emergence of the opportunist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel within the Fourth International following World War II. The ICFI was founded in 1953 to defend the program of Trotskyism against Pabloite revisionism.

The decisions taken by the ICFI following the LSSP's betrayal, including the RCL's founding, "prefigured a worldwide wave of class struggles starting from 1968 and spanning seven years up to 1975," Dias said. Various revisionist tendencies played a crucial auxiliary role in propping up capitalism during this period, including in the May-June 1968 general strike in France, the struggles in the plantation and private sectors in Sri Lanka and in the turmoil following the toppling of the fascist-military dictatorships in Greece and Portugal in 1975.

Dias explained the long record of the RCL/SEP in fighting for the principles of Trotskyism. The RCL's founding general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya wrote a book analysing the politics and class nature of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1970. Despite its profound political differences with the JVP, the RCL opposed the wave of state repression against the JVP and rural youth in 1971 and raised the call for the "release of political prisoners". The RCL campaigned against the 1972 Sinhala-Buddhist racialist constitution.

"We are recalling this 40-year-long struggle to prepare for the present political struggles. The RCL/SEP and the ICFI are based on political and theoretical foundations that alone can resolve political issues raised before us today. Ours is the only movement that can proudly recall and explain its history. In contrast to those political organisations oriented to Mao, Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara, the ICFI is developing an audience of tens of thousands worldwide."

Dias concluded by calling on those at the meeting "to join the struggle of the SEP, to introduce the WSWS to the widest possible audience among workers, youths and students, to fight to educate them through the analysis of the WSWS and thus to build the SEP as the mass party of the working class".

The meeting concluded with a collection of 5,850 rupees for the SEP fund.

Several people in attendance spoke to the WSWS about the meeting.

Chamika, a Colombo University student, explained why he had attended. "In our studies some lecturers referred to Trotsky on several issues, especially on the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the field of art. However, they didn't portray a concrete idea on Trotsky's opinions on the above issues. I had a chance to discuss Trotsky with one of my classmates who has a close relationship with the SEP.

"As I see it, the civil war is the most burning issue we face. I want to learn about the stand taken by the RCL and the SEP on the Sri Lankan national question. We understand that the Sri Lankan ruling class cannot solve this problem. At first we thought that after defeating the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam], we could enjoy the peace. However, the situation in the Eastern province is worse than in the past. Armed conflicts are taking

place not only among the different ethnic groups, but also within the same ethnic groups.

"I strongly believe that every government of Colombo has discriminated against the Tamils over the 60 years since the independence. As the SEP says, they used this discrimination in order to divide the working class along ethnic lines. The rulers don't want to stop the war. However, I don't have a concrete idea on how to solve this problem. I think this lecture will help provide an answer to my questions."

Prasanna, from the same university, said: "University students face many problems. Actually, we don't enjoy the right of free education. We only receive a monthly bursary of 2,500 rupees and it is just enough to pay our room charges. In addition, we spend 4,000 rupees for our meals. Since the majority of us come from working class and peasant families, our parents cannot afford the rest. We do some odd jobs and we miss our lectures often."

"Due to the skyrocketing prices of goods and services, we have had to reduce our three meals to two per day. We wait for the bursary day to return the money we have previously borrowed. From the next day we have to borrow again. We are in a vicious circle of debt. Even after the graduation, we have to wait in the unemployed line for years."

"The JVP's student union says that university students have won so many demands through the struggles led by them. Actually, my experience is, we didn't win a single demand through these struggles. The truth is that the JVP is responsible for the cuts in education. They voted for every war budget of the recent government. The government allocates money for the war by cutting the money for welfare, health and education."

"The JVP is the main obstacle among the students that we have to overcome. Its Sinhala racism divides the students as it does the working class. The JVP is losing its base of support among the students. I came here to find an alternative for all our problems."

"According to the international news, the same thing is happening all over the world. The hike of food and fuel prices has affected the people all over the world. We can see welfare cuts in every country. University students throughout the world are facing the same problems. As the SEP says, an international socialist movement is a must. I appreciate the history of the RCL's struggle."



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