

D.N. Wickremaratne 1950—2012

Sri Lankan Trotskyist dies

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
11 October 2012

D.N. Wickremaratne, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), died early Sunday morning at the Sri Jayawardenapura General Hospital in the Colombo suburbs.

Wickremaratne had been hospitalised for a serious fever on September 17. He suffered a major stroke last weekend and never regained consciousness. He leaves behind his mother, his wife Dantha, three daughters and three grandchildren. His untimely death at the age of 62 is a great loss to the party. His funeral was held yesterday, with the participation of SEP members and villagers at his home town of Taligama.

He was known simply as DN among his comrades, as well as friends and neighbours. Anyone who attended SEP public meetings and events would not forget him, as he was regularly in charge of the party's literature table. He would always emphasise the importance of reading Marxist literature, whether to a fresh face or a longstanding comrade searching for a new publication.

Wickremaratne was born in Taligama near Yatiyanthota, about 70 kilometres from Colombo, on February 2, 1950. The area is still largely rural—farmers as well as Tamil- and Sinhala-speaking tea and rubber plantation workers. His father was a power sector worker. Coming from a working class background, Wickremaratne was well aware of the harsh conditions of life in the area. Unemployment was rampant and basic facilities such as electricity and running water scarcely existed.

The area became a political stronghold of the Lanka

Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) after it was formed in the 1930s. With the outbreak of World War II, the LSSP broke from its nationalist program and established the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) as a section of the Fourth International in the Indian subcontinent. The BLPI struck deep roots in the working class in Sri Lanka and India through its principled struggle against imperialism and war under the banner of Trotskyism.

The BLPI was liquidated into a revived, opportunist LSSP in 1950, which after a protracted period of political backsliding betrayed the fundamental principles of socialist internationalism and joined a bourgeois coalition government in 1964.

Like many workers and youth, however, Wickremaratne was attracted to the history of revolutionary struggle that clung to the LSSP from its BLPI days. He nevertheless had his doubts. At the age of 21, he witnessed the brutal crushing of an uprising of rural youth by a coalition government that included the LSSP. Some 15,000 young people were slaughtered by the security forces.

Wickremaratne did not join the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which had organised the adventurist uprising based on the petty bourgeois nostrums of the “armed struggle” promoted by Castroism and Maoism. And he kept his distance from the LSSP, rejecting an offer of employment by that party.

In the late 1980s, he started reading the *Kamkaru Mawatha*, the Sinhala language newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP's forerunner, and attended RCL meetings in Colombo, along with two close supporters. He joined the RCL in

1990 during the party's struggle to defend rural youth against the genocidal attacks of the United National Party (UNP) government and the military's death squads.

This was a period of extraordinary political turbulence. In response to intensifying attacks by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on the Sri Lankan military in the north, and growing opposition by workers and the rural poor in the south, the beleaguered government of President J.R. Jayawardene signed an Indo-Lanka agreement with India in 1987. Indian "peacekeeping" troops were sent to northern Sri Lanka to disarm the LTTE and oversee a regional autonomy plan.

The JVP, which had always been based on Sinhala populism, launched a reactionary chauvinist campaign against the Accord and carried out a series of fascistic attacks on political opponents and workers who refused to take part. The JVP murdered three RCL members. The RCL opposed the Accord, not from the standpoint of "defending the nation," but as part of the fight to unite Sinhala and Tamil workers against the Colombo government.

The RCL and the ICFI launched a powerful international campaign for a united front of working class organisations to take concrete measures against both state repression and the JVP's gunmen. After manoeuvring with the JVP, the UNP government headed by President R. Premadasa turned against it, murdered its leadership and crushed rural unrest by killing some 60,000 youth.

Wickremaratne took a courageous stand in joining the RCL in this difficult period, as the RCL's Sinhala and Tamil publications, *Kamkaru Mawatha* and *Tholilalar Pathai*, exposed the slaughter of the youth and called on workers to defend the rural poor. RCL members visited the villages and homes of the victims to investigate these crimes and faced intense hostility from the police, the LSSP, the Stalinist Communist Party and trade unions.

From that period on, Wickremaratne was known for being in the forefront of RCL and SEP campaigns in

his area, especially among Tamil-speaking plantation workers, the most deprived section of the Sri Lankan working class.

Wickremaratne welcomed the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the organ of the ICFI in 1998, which he regarded as a key initiative to deepen the understanding of workers of global developments and Marxist analysis. He provided news and information for the writing of articles on developments among plantation workers.

Diagnosed with coronary artery disease in February, Wickremaratne had bypass surgery in March. After recovering, he participated in the SEP's campaign for the provincial council elections for Kegalla in September. He was firmly convinced that only the fight for an international socialist perspective could solve the burning issues facing working people.

Wickremaratne is well remembered for his firm, disciplined and principled approach to party work. He held his comrades and the party leadership in high regard and was always concerned about their health and security. He was known for his politeness, friendliness and patience, as well as his hospitality toward visiting comrades.

The veteran Trotskyist encouraged his daughters, as well as his sons-in-law, among whom he was loved and highly respected, to read party literature and to attend party meetings, especially on May Day.

The principles of socialist internationalism for which Wickremaratne fought over the past two decades are now attracting a broad audience among workers and young people, as the crisis of global capitalism deepens and the attacks on democratic rights and living standards intensify. We will honour the memory of comrade D.N. Wickremaratne for a long time to come.



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