

In Memory of Keerthi Balasuriya

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This tribute was written by David North and originally posted on the WSWs in December 2007 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the death of Keerthi Balasuriya.

It is with profound respect and a continuing sense of loss that the International Committee of the Fourth International marks today the 20th anniversary of the sudden and terribly premature death of Keerthi Balasuriya. Even after the passage of so many years, for all those who knew and worked with Comrade Keerthi the sense of political and personal loss remains acute.

His death on the morning of December 18, 1987, while at work in the offices of the Sri Lankan Revolutionary Communist League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party), came without any warning. Less than one month had passed since he had returned from Europe, where he had attended a meeting of the International Committee. Keerthi was at his desk, writing a statement on the political lessons of the 1985-86 split in the ICFI, when he suffered a fatal heart attack. He was only 39. Comrade Keerthi, had he lived, would only now be looking forward to his 60th birthday.

But for all that we lost with his premature death, Comrade Keerthi left behind a substantial and enduring legacy of political work that constitutes an essential foundation of the world Trotskyist movement.

Notwithstanding the immense political and economic changes of the past two decades, the issues and problems with which Keerthi grappled remain no less urgent and relevant today than they were at the time of his death.

Keerthi was born on November 4, 1948, little more than one year after both India and Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was called until 1972) acquired state independence on the basis of squalid deals between British imperialism and the national bourgeoisie of the subcontinent. In different ways, the settlements reached between the Indian and Ceylonese national bourgeoisie on the one hand and imperialism on the other set the stage for all the political tragedies that were to unfold over the next six decades.

These settlements demonstrated that the national bourgeoisie of India and Ceylon feared social revolution far more than they desired genuine independence. Gandhi and Nehru accepted the partition of India along religious lines, a betrayal of the democratic and social aspirations of the masses that has cost the lives of millions, condemned the subcontinent to recurrent wars, and consolidated the grip of imperialism over the region. In Ceylon, the “independence” fashioned by the national bourgeoisie institutionalized systematic discrimination against the Tamil minority and sowed the seeds of the future civil war.

The betrayal of the independence struggle by the national bourgeoisie vindicated the central tenets of Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, which insisted that the historically progressive tasks of the democratic anti-imperialist struggle could be achieved only through the conquest of power by the working class, led by a Marxist party based on an internationalist and socialist program.

In fact, in the aftermath of the formal transfer of power to the Indian and Ceylonese bourgeoisie, the principles of the theory of permanent revolution were invoked by the leaders of the Ceylonese Trotskyist movement, who condemned the terms upon which independence was

achieved. However, over the following decade, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—the Trotskyist party—drifted steadily to the right.

While this process developed in response to the pressures of the national environment, which encouraged all sorts of opportunist adaptations in the pursuit of parliamentary gains, a key factor in the degeneration of the LSSP was the general growth of revisionist tendencies inside the Fourth International. Led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, these forces systematically covered up for and even encouraged the opportunist orientation of the LSSP.

The protracted political degeneration reached its climax in 1964, when the LSSP, which still enjoyed a mass following in the working class, agreed to join the crisis-ridden bourgeois government of Madam Bandaranaike. This was a turning point in the history both of Ceylon and the Fourth International. In the case of the latter, the entry of the LSSP into a reactionary political coalition with the bourgeoisie exposed the counter-revolutionary nature of Pabloite revisionism. For Ceylon, the formation of the coalition set into motion the process that led inexorably, within less than 20 years, to the eruption of civil war.

Keerthi Balasuriya’s education consisted above all in assimilating the political lessons of these experiences. The International Committee played the central role in this process. Having been formed as a product of the political struggle against Pablo and Mandel which erupted inside the Fourth International in 1953, the International Committee had followed developments in Ceylon and drawn attention to the increasingly opportunist course of the LSSP.

In the aftermath of the LSSP’s entry into coalition, the British Trotskyists under the leadership of Gerry Healy mounted a political offensive against the LSSP that found a response among the best sections of the Trotskyist student youth in Ceylon. The work of political clarification, which spanned several years, led to the formation of the Revolutionary Communist League in 1968. Keerthi was elected to the post of general secretary.

It did not take long before the RCL and Comrade Keerthi confronted a major political test. The treachery of the LSSP weakened the working class movement, helped split the peasantry from the workers, created immense political confusion and created a climate favorable for the growth of Maoist influence among significant sections of the peasant and student youth. This led to the formation and rapid growth of the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—People’s Liberation Front).

This organization projected an image of ferocious anti-imperialist militancy. It required both political courage and Marxist perspicacity to detect and expose the essentially petty-bourgeois and reactionary political perspective concealed within the revolutionary rhetoric of the JVP.

In 1970, Keerthi wrote *The Class Nature and Politics of the JVP*, which clearly established the petty-bourgeois and anti-Marxist character of this organization. Its leader, Wijeweera, threatened that Keerthi would be hanged when the JVP came to power.

But in 1971, the coalition government launched a ferocious wave of repression against the JVP and its supporters among the rural youth. Notwithstanding its irreconcilable differences with the JVP, the RCL launched a campaign against the government’s repression. Even the JVP

was compelled to acknowledge the principled character of the RCL's politics. After his release from prison, Wijeweera personally went to the headquarters of the RCL to express his appreciation of the party's campaign. (This did not prevent the JVP from launching attacks against RCL cadre in the late 1980s.)

An even more significant demonstration of Keerthi's political firmness and strength of character was shown in his criticism of the position taken by the British Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League in support of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's decision to send troops into East Pakistan, supposedly in support of the Bengali liberation movement. A statement written by Michael Banda of the SLL (predecessor of the Workers Revolutionary Party), published on December 6, 1971, declared, "We critically support the decision of the Indian bourgeois government to give military and economic aid to Bangladesh."

The position adopted by the RCL was diametrically opposed to that of the SLL. An RCL statement published on December 8, 1971 declared: "The Trotskyist movement, representing the revolutionary interests of the proletariat, defines its position in relation to all these movements, struggles and conflicts from the standpoint of the proletarian struggle for socialism. It declares emphatically and unequivocally that the task of the proletariat is not that of supporting any one of the warring factions of the bourgeoisie, but that of utilizing each and every conflict in the camp of the class enemy for the seizure of power with the perspective of setting up a federated socialist republic which alone would be able to satisfy the social and national aspirations of the millions of toilers in the subcontinent."

Lacking the type of instantaneous communications that exist today, the RCL was not aware of the SLL's position when it published its own statement. When the SLL statement arrived in Colombo, Keerthi instructed that the RCL immediately withdraw its own position from public circulation. He did so because, as he wrote to Cliff Slaughter, the secretary of the ICFI, "clarity inside the international is more important than anything else" and "it is impossible for us to build a national section without fighting to build the international." However, in explaining the RCL's disagreement with the SLL, Keerthi did not mince words in his December 16, 1971 letter to Slaughter:

"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. Without opposing the war from within India and Pakistan it is completely absurd to talk about a unified socialist India which alone can safeguard the right of self-determination of the many nations in the Indian subcontinent."

On January 11, 1972, Keerthi dispatched another letter to London, this time in reply to Mike Banda's enthusiastic support for Gandhi's intervention. He detected in Banda's position a retreat from the Trotskyist principles which previously had been defended by the ICFI against the Pabloites.

"The logic of the false political position of the IC on Bangladesh would have and has led to the abandonment of all the past experiences of the Marxist movement regarding the struggle of the colonial masses. Now it is evident that these attempts are tending to move in the direction of revising all the capital gains made by the SLL leadership in the fight against the SWP during the 1961-63 period. Your December 27 letter was nothing more than an attempt to defend a political position which completely breaks with Marxism. By attempting to defend it you have distorted Marxism, drowned yourself in confusion and exposed your political bankruptcy."

Keerthi's prescient letters were not circulated within the International Committee by the Socialist Labour League. Realizing that the RCL was capable of adopting an independent and critical attitude to the work of the ICFI, the Socialist Labour League set out to isolate the Sri Lankan Trotskyists and Comrade Keerthi.

The more the SLL (and then the WRP) drifted to the right, the more

pernicious and ruthless the efforts to isolate the RCL became. It was not until the eruption of the political crisis within the British organization and the International Committee in 1985 that it became possible for these valuable letters to find an audience within the International movement.

The impressionistic response of the Socialist Labour League to the Indian government's military intervention in East Pakistan and its vindictive reaction to the Revolutionary Communist League's criticisms reflected a deepening political crisis within the British organization. It was hardly an accident that Michael Banda had emerged as the spokesman for the SLL's endorsement of the Indian government's policies. For several years he had been expressing doubt about the relevance of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution, which insisted upon the central and decisive revolutionary role of the working class in the struggle against imperialism.

Had not the victory of Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, Mao Zedong in China, and even Tito in Yugoslavia demonstrated the possibility of alternative paths to socialism, based on the armed struggle of the peasantry? For Banda, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's intervention in East Pakistan, an action which antagonized the Nixon administration, was yet another form of anti-imperialist struggle. It demonstrated, in Banda's view, that the national bourgeoisie in Asia was capable of revolutionary initiatives which contradicted Trotsky's perspective.

Fearful of the organizational disruption that might result from an open conflict within the SLL leadership over basic programmatic issues, Gerry Healy, the principal leader of the British section, sought to avoid a discussion of the political differences. Moreover, Banda was hardly alone in his doubts about the viability of the Trotskyist perspective. In the 1960s the political radicalization of significant sections of the petty bourgeoisie had substantially increased the social constituency for the sort of revisionist politics that had been pioneered by Pablo and Mandel. The SLL itself had benefited organizationally from the radicalization of student youth. To the extent that the SLL retreated from its earlier intransigence on essential questions of revolutionary program and perspective, newly radicalized youth and other elements from the petty bourgeoisie entered the British movement without undergoing the necessary education in the history and principles of the Fourth International. This danger was compounded by the fact that the politically influential strata of professional academics who played a major role in the theoretical and educational work of the SLL was particularly susceptible to the lure of various forms of petty-bourgeois revisions of Marxism.

It was in this increasingly murky political environment that the SLL leadership rationalized its evasion of the struggle for programmatic clarity by arguing that agreement on philosophical method was far more important. Indeed, in an astonishing redefinition of the approach that the Trotskyist movement had taken throughout its history, Healy and his principal advisor on matters theoretical, Cliff Slaughter, began to argue that the very discussion of program was a real impediment to the development of dialectical thought! And so there appeared in the documents of the International Committee the claim, authored by Slaughter, that the "experience of building the revolutionary party in Britain" had demonstrated "that a thoroughgoing and difficult struggle against idealist ways of thinking was necessary which went much deeper than questions of agreement on program and policy." [*Trotskyism Versus Revisionism*, Vol. 6, London, 1975, p. 83.]

Healy may not have clearly understood (though Professor Cliff Slaughter certainly did) that the type of separation of the "struggle for Marxist theory" from the development of the revolutionary perspective of the working class advocated in this and similar formulations represented a dangerous political and theoretical capitulation to conceptions that were wildly popular in the petty-bourgeois milieu of the anti-Marxist New Left. But however Healy rationalized his position in his own mind, the new theoretical arguments both reflected and encouraged skepticism about the

historic role of the Fourth International.

As Slaughter wrote in 1972: "Will revolutionary parties, able to lead the working class to power and the building of socialism, be built simply by bringing the program, the existing forces of Trotskyism, onto the scene of political developments caused by the crisis? Or will it not be necessary to conduct a conscious struggle *for theory*, for the negation of all the past experience and theory of the movement into the transformed reality of the class struggle." [Ibid, p. 226]

It is only necessary to strip this passage of its rhetorical form and deconstruct its pretentious pseudo-philosophical syntax, so beloved of petty-bourgeois academics, to expose the two distinctly revisionist and politically liquidationist positions that were being advanced by Slaughter: 1) The Trotskyist movement, based on the historically developed program of the Fourth International, would not be able to lead the working class to power; and 2) The "transformed reality of the class struggle" [a favorite Pabloite phrase] required a "conscious struggle *for theory*," which consisted of the "negation" [i.e., the junking] "of all the past experience and theory of the movement."

For Healy, Banda and Slaughter, these formulations were not merely a matter for abstract debate. As the 1970s unfolded, they sought to implement them with a vengeance. Increasingly dismissive of the programmatic heritage of Trotskyism, the SLL became hostile to the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International ["the existing forces of Trotskyism"] and began to search for other political forces with whom new alliances could be constructed. These were eventually to be found in national movements and regimes in the Middle East.

This right-wing shift in the politics of the SLL (which became the Workers Revolutionary Party in November 1973) underlay the deepening isolation of Keerthi Balasuriya and the Revolutionary Communist League within the International Committee. The RCL's criticisms of the SLL response to the Indo-Pak War of 1971 were taken by Healy, Banda and Slaughter, quite correctly, as an indication that the Ceylonese/Sri Lankan section would not go along with their abandonment of Trotskyist politics.

Despite the extremely difficult conditions under which the Sri Lankan comrades conducted their work, which were worsened by the fact that they were denied any semblance of fraternal support and collaboration within the ICFI, the RCL continued to defend the principles of Trotskyism. Particularly noteworthy in this regard was the party's response to government-instigated anti-Tamil pogroms that broke out in Colombo in July 1983. In the face of brutal repressive measures, the RCL spoke out fearlessly in opposition to the anti-Tamil campaign.

Even under these dangerous conditions, the RCL received no support from the international movement, which remained under the control of the Workers Revolutionary Party. The WRP actually posted a statement in its newspaper, written by Michael Banda, which noted in passing that "It is possible, even probable, that the police and army [in Sri Lanka] have used the arbitrary and uncontrolled powers granted to them under the emergency laws to kill our comrades and destroy their press." However, the statement issued neither a condemnation of this persecution nor a call for an international campaign for the defense of the Revolutionary Communist League.

The Workers Revolutionary Party took care not to inform the Revolutionary Communist League of the serious theoretical and political criticisms raised by the Workers League between October 1982 and February 1984. In January 1984, the Political Committee of the Workers League specifically requested that Comrade Keerthi be invited to London to attend a meeting of the ICFI at which new criticisms of the political line of the Workers Revolutionary Party were to be discussed.

However, when I arrived in London, I was told by Michael Banda that it had not been possible to establish contact with the Sri Lankan comrades

and, therefore, Keerthi would not be present at the meeting. Banda's gross lie demonstrated the lengths to which the WRP leadership was prepared to go in order to prevent a principled discussion of political differences within the International Committee. In fact, Healy, Banda and Slaughter had simply decided among themselves not to inform the RCL of the scheduled meeting.

However, the eruption of a dirty scandal and intense organizational crisis within the WRP, the culmination of more than a decade of opportunism, made it impossible for the WRP leaders to continue to block political discussion within the International Committee. In late October 1985, Keerthi, with the assistance of the Australian section, flew to London. Upon his arrival, he was almost immediately called into the office of Michael Banda, who proceeded to regale him at great length with the salacious details of the sexual scandal involving Healy. When Banda had finally exhausted himself, Keerthi asked: "What precisely, Comrade Mike, are your *political* differences with Gerry Healy?" The question seemed to catch Banda off balance. Unable to formulate an answer of his own, Banda handed Keerthi a copy of the report that I had given to the ICFI meeting in February 1984, which consisted of a detailed criticism of the political line of the Workers Revolutionary Party.

On Sunday morning, October 20, 1985, I received a call from Banda informing me that a statement was about to be published in the *Newsline*, the WRP newspaper, announcing the expulsion of Healy. This decision had been taken without any discussion within the International Committee. Almost as an afterthought Banda told me that Keerthi and Nick Beams, the secretary of the Australian section, were in London. Were they available to speak to me, I asked? Banda's evasive answer quickly convinced me that there was no use pursuing the matter with him.

After hanging up, I called the offices of the WRP on another line and asked to speak to Nick and Keerthi. When Keerthi came to the phone, he stated at once, "I have read your political criticisms, and am in agreement with them." Nick, Keerthi and I agreed that it was necessary to discuss the political issues raised by the crisis that had broken out in the WRP and develop a unified response within the International Committee. That evening I flew to London. Though I had known Keerthi since the early 1970s, it was only with the outbreak of the struggle within the ICFI that my political collaboration with this extraordinary man really began.

The political struggle that unfolded in the weeks and months that followed marked a turning point in the history of the Fourth International. The source of the political strength that has been demonstrated by the International Committee during the past two decades of tumultuous upheavals is to be found in the high level of theoretical clarity and programmatic agreement achieved on the basis of the detailed analysis of the crisis and break-up of the Workers Revolutionary Party. It is not an exaggeration to state that there is not another struggle within the history of the Trotskyist movement in which the political and theoretical issues underlying the split were analyzed in such depth and detail.

The role played by Keerthi during this period was of an absolutely critical character. His vast knowledge of the history of the revolutionary socialist movement was combined with an exceptional capacity for political analysis. Poring over the political statements produced by the WRP between 1973 and 1985, Keerthi would discover those critical passages in which he detected a retreat from Marxism. The significance of the passage upon which Keerthi had focused was not always immediately apparent. He would then rephrase it, and begin to expound on its practical implications.

These insights would be supplemented by references to the history of the Marxist movement. As the discussion unfolded, it became clear that more was involved than the scoring of an additional polemical point. Keerthi was engaged in the elaboration of a comprehensive critique of the theory and practice of the political opportunism associated with the conceptions of Pablo and Mandel that had wreaked havoc inside the

Fourth International.

The essential conclusion of this critique was summed up in an editorial published in the *Fourth International*, the theoretical journal of the ICFL, in March 1987:

“Thus the revisionism that attacked the Fourth International after World War II was a class phenomenon which reflected the changing political needs of imperialism itself. Confronted with the emergence of proletarian revolution, imperialism had to open up possibilities for new layers of the middle classes to assume the role of a buffer between its interests and that of the proletariat. Pabloite revisionism translated these basic needs of imperialism and the class interests of the petty bourgeoisie into those vital theoretical formulae which justified the adaptation of the Trotskyist movement to these forces. It pandered to the futile illusion that the petty bourgeoisie, through its control of the state apparatus, can create socialism without the old bourgeois state first being destroyed by proletarian revolution in which the working class—not various middle class surrogates—is the principal historical actor.

“As early as 1951, the sweeping political generalizations drawn by Pablo from the peculiar circumstances of capitalism’s overthrow in Eastern Europe were worked into programmatic innovations whose revisionist content went well beyond its linking of socialism to a nuclear Armageddon (the theory of ‘war-revolution’). The conception that there existed a road to socialism that did not depend upon either the revolutionary initiative of a mass proletarian movement or upon the construction of independent proletarian parties led by Marxists became the *idée fixe* of Pabloism. Thus, the central axis of its revisions was not simply its evaluation of Stalinism and the possibilities for its ‘self-reform.’ That was only one of the many ugly faces of Pabloite revisionism.

“The essential revision of Pabloism, and what has made it so useful to imperialism, is its attack on the most fundamental premises of scientific socialism. The scientifically-grounded conviction that the liberation of the proletariat is the task of the proletariat itself and that the task of socialism *begins* with the dictatorship of the proletariat—as Marx indicated as far back as 1851—is directly challenged by Pabloism, whose theory of socialism assigns the main role to the petty bourgeoisie. And while Pabloism from time to time pays formal homage to the working class, it never goes so far as to insist that neither the overthrow of capitalism nor the construction of socialism are possible without the existence of a very high level of theoretical consciousness, produced through the many years of struggle which are required to build a Marxist party, in a substantial section of the proletariat.

“The unrestrained opportunism which has always characterized the tactics employed by the Pabloites flows inexorably from their rejection of the proletarian foundation of socialism. The Marxist understands that the education of the proletariat in a scientific appreciation of its long-term historical tasks requires a principled line. He therefore *prefers* temporary isolation to short-term gains that are purchased at the expense of the political clarification of the working class. But the Pabloite is not ‘restrained’ by such considerations. His tactics are directed toward the subordination of the independence of the proletariat to whatever nonproletarian forces temporarily dominate the mass movement.” [Volume 14, No. 1, March 1987, p. iii-iv]

Workers Revolutionary Party was extraordinarily intense. I had the privilege of working side by side with Keerthi on many of the documents produced during that period. I recall the many hours of discussion out of which the documents emerged. But I remember not only the political discussions. Keerthi’s interests were wide-ranging.

Before he turned to politics, Keerthi, while still a student, had displayed substantial promise as a poet. He possessed a broad knowledge of literature, music and the arts. For all his intellectual rigor, Keerthi was exceptionally kind and humane in his relationships with comrades and friends. His socialist convictions flowed from a deep-rooted sympathy with the conditions of the oppressed and concern for the fate of mankind.

Twenty years after his death, Comrade Keerthi remains a powerful political and moral presence in our international movement. In the two decades since his death, the political forces against which he fought relentlessly—the bourgeois nationalists, the Stalinists, the Maoists, the anti-Trotskyist renegades of the LSSP, the WRP and other revisionist tendencies—have been discredited by events. The revolutionary offensive of the working class will inevitably give rise to a renewed and passionate interest in genuine Marxism. Enormous opportunities to expand the political influence of the International Committee will soon present themselves. But these opportunities must be grasped as a means of achieving historical aims, rather than mere tactical advantages. It is through the unrelenting struggle to uphold the perspective of world socialist revolution that we honor the memory and continue the work of Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya.



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The work that was carried out in the aftermath of the split with the