

The enduring significance of the life and work of Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya

18 December 2012

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* today mark 25 years since the death of Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya, the general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka.

Comrade Keerthi was among the most outstanding representatives of Trotskyism in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. His death on the morning of December 18, 1987 was both sudden and tragically premature. He was felled by a heart attack little more than a month after his 39th birthday.

Keerthi Balasuriya emerged out of the rich Trotskyist tradition in Sri Lanka. As a teenager, he aligned himself with those who opposed the 1964 entry of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Sri Lankan affiliate of the International Secretariat of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, into a bourgeois coalition government led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

The turning point in Comrade Keerthi's life arose from an intervention by the British Trotskyists in Sri Lanka, as a result of which he recognized that the issues involved in the LSSP's betrayal—the first time a party claiming to be Trotskyist had joined a bourgeois government—went far beyond the LSSP's adaptation over the previous decade to syndicalism, parliamentarism and Sinhala populism. The “Great Betrayal of 1964” had been aided and abetted by Pablo and Mandel.

It was the outcome of the development within the Fourth International, under conditions of the post-war restabilization of capitalism, of a virulent opportunist tendency which sought to transform Trotskyism into an appendage of the counterrevolutionary Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies and, in the colonial countries, the national bourgeoisie. To answer the LSSP's betrayal and build a revolutionary working class party based on the program of Permanent Revolution required assimilating the lessons of the struggle waged by the ICFI, founded in 1953 expressly to oppose Pabloite liquidationism, and entering its ranks.

In 1968, at the age of 19, Keerthi was chosen by the founding congress of the RCL to be its general secretary. The RCL immediately sought affiliation with the ICFI.

Even more decisive was the role Comrade Keerthi played in the successful struggle to reassert Trotskyist control over the International Committee of the Fourth International through the

split with the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in 1985-86.

As David North, chairman of the WSWs editorial board, explains in a lengthier examination of Comrade Keerthi's life that we are republishing today, the RCL leader brought to bear his vast knowledge of the strategic experiences of the working class and the history of the Marxist movement in contributing to the ICFI's detailed exposure of the WRP's descent into opportunism.

Comrade Keerthi's entire political life unfolded in a period when the working class and oppressed masses, for complex reasons bound up with the betrayals of Stalinism and Social Democracy and the temporary restabilization of world capitalism after World War II, gave their allegiance to organizations other than the ICFI.

Basing himself on the scientific perspective developed by the classical Marxists and the Fourth International, Comrade Keerthi was utterly opposed to those who looked to the Stalinist bureaucracy as a surrogate for the working class or were mesmerized by the apparent success of Mao's nationalist program of peasant-based “people's war.”

He was convinced that the only force upon which the struggle for socialism could be based was the international working class, and that the principal task of revolutionary Marxists was to forge the political independence of the working class by saturating it, to use the well-known expression of Lenin, with socialist consciousness.

At Keerthi's funeral, a representative of the ICFI predicted that it would be Keerthi Balasuriya, not the various Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist leaders—the Maos, Ho Chi Minhs, Nehrus, and Castros—who would emerge in the coming period as the teacher of revolutionary-minded workers and youth.

A quarter-century ago that prognosis would have struck all but a very few as not merely audacious, but hyperbolic. History, however, has more than vindicated it.

Within less than five years of Keerthi's death, the USSR and the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe had been liquidated, as the Stalinist bureaucracy restored capitalism.

Nominally, the People's Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam still exist. But in both states the Stalinist bureaucracy has restored capitalism and presides over the ruthless exploitation of the working class on behalf of US,

European, Japanese and Taiwan-based transnational corporations and a new class of indigenous capitalist parvenus.

And what of the bourgeois nationalist leaders who postured as opponents of imperialism and spouted socialist phrases?

Deprived of the patronage of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, Castro's regime has opened its doors to European, Canadian and Latin American investment and presides over ever deepening social inequality and poverty. Meanwhile, it allows the free circulation of US dollars and closes down large parts of the state-owned sector.

The PLO and the Palestinian Authority it heads act as policemen for the US and Israel.

India's Congress Party long ago abandoned state-led development, which it touted as Congress socialism in an attempt to deceive the masses. It has embarked on the transformation of India into a cheap labor sweatshop for world capitalism. In foreign policy, the Indian bourgeoisie has cast aside non-alignment in favor of a strategic alliance with US imperialism and the build-up of its own military might.

India's "mass" Stalinist parliamentary parties have openly supported the bourgeoisie's "new economic policy," propping up a series of Congress-led governments. In those states where they have held office, they have pursued what they themselves term "pro-investor" policies.

Within Sri Lanka, the historical verdict of a quarter century has been no less conclusive. The petty-bourgeois organizations that grew in strength under conditions where the working class was politically harnessed by the LSSP and the Stalinist Communist Party to bourgeois governments have proven to be a blind alley.

The JVP (People's Liberation Front) has provided parliamentary support to Sri Lanka's right-wing UPFA government and enthusiastically supported the Sinhalese bourgeoisie's communal war against the Tamil minority.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was hostile to any appeal to the only social force that could secure the democratic rights of the Tamil people—the Sinhalese and international working class. Instead, it sought to carve out a capitalist state in the north and east by appealing for the support of India and the imperialist powers.

The perspective advanced by the RCL-SEP—the revolutionary mobilization of the toilers, Sinhalese and Tamil, under the leadership of the working class in the fight for the United Socialist States of Tamil Eelam and Sri Lanka—has been demonstrated to be the only viable means of realizing the democratic and social aspirations of the masses.

As for the Pabloites, who cynically sought to pass themselves off as Trotskyists, they have embedded themselves in various state parties, from the Left Party in Germany to *Rifondazione Comunista* in Italy, which have imposed capitalist austerity and supported imperialist war.

The NSSP, the current Sri Lankan group aligned with the Mandeliste "International," is in an alliance for "democracy"

with the United National Party (UNP), the traditional right-wing party of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and the party that in 1977 initiated pro-market reform and in 1983 launched the anti-Tamil war.

Who can doubt that the ICFI, with its orientation to the political education and mobilization of the working class, is the authentic voice of Trotskyism and classical Marxism? Through the *World Socialist Web Site*, it fights to arm the working class with an international socialist perspective, while defining on a daily basis the independent class standpoint of the working class on all major political, social and historical issues.

In the light of a quarter century, Comrade Keerthi's life and struggle have not only not diminished in significance, they have emerged enhanced.

Under conditions of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression and the world war it engendered, workers and young people will increasingly be impelled into struggle against capitalism. They will find in the political biography of Comrade Keerthi Balisuriya an inspiring example of courageous and principled political struggle. Even more importantly, in the Marxist political conceptions that he defended and developed they will find the theoretical and political weapons to guide the struggle for the political independence and revolutionary mobilization of the international working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International

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Over the coming year, the *World Socialist Web Site* will make Comrade Keerthi's writings accessible to an international audience. This will include publication of his seminal and prophetic exposure of the petty-bourgeois JVP, *The Class Nature and Politics of the JVP*, first published in 1970.

The author also recommends:

In Memory of Keerthi Balasuriya



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact