

25 years since Keerthi Balasuriya's death: South Asia's foremost Marxist of the second half of the 20th century

Part One

Wije Dias

26 December 2012

[Part One] [Part Two]

Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), died of a sudden heart attack at the age of just 39 on December 18, 1987. His untimely demise cut short a life consciously devoted for more than two decades to the struggle to revive the revolutionary strategy of proletarian internationalism among workers and the oppressed masses in Sri Lanka and throughout the region. The RCL was the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

On the day of his death, Comrade Keerthi was drafting a document for the ICFI, clarifying the political tasks confronting the world Trotskyist movement in the aftermath of the 1985-86 split with the renegades of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). He was concentrating in particular on the issues posed for the RCL and the working class throughout South Asia, in the wake of India's military-political intervention in Sri Lanka from July 1987.

In an obituary written at the time, Workers League National Secretary David North stated: "Despite all the immense political pressures confronting the Revolutionary Communist League in Sri Lanka, Comrade Keerthi would not be deterred from his international responsibilities as a leader of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The great political ideal which inspired all his works was the cause of proletarian internationalism, which for Comrade Keerthi, found its supreme expression in the struggle to build the world party of socialist revolution."

Addressing the hundreds of workers and youth at Keerthi's funeral, North emphasised the enormous significance of his role: "In the period immediately ahead, the workers, not only in Asia but throughout the world, will read and study the writings of Comrade Keerthi."

The upsurge of the class struggle today, driven by the ongoing breakdown of global capitalism since 2008, has underlined the necessity of studying the profound theoretical and political contribution made by Keerthi Balasuriya. Whether in North Africa or the Middle East, in the historically backward and the advanced countries of the world, the urgent need is to resolve the crisis of leadership of the working class on the basis of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution.

Keerthi joined a radicalised group of youth in early 1966 that was looking to overcome the political problems and confusion generated by the historic betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1964. The LSSP was the first party in the world calling itself Trotskyist to join a capitalist government when it entered a coalition with the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike.

This betrayal took place at a time when the working class and youth were moving into a struggle of revolutionary proportions against the SLFP government. The major trade union federations, in both government and private sectors, had formed a common front called the Joint Committee of Trade Union Organisations (JCTUO) and were threatening industrial action if their list of 21 demands was not met by the government. Young people were being radicalised. University students were protesting against the Vietnam War and the murder of Patrice Lumumba of Congo as well as in support of the workers' struggles and against the attacks on free education.

The LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government created widespread bewilderment among workers and youth. The LSSP shut down the 21-demands movement. More thoughtful layers of workers and youth who wanted to fight the LSSP's treachery were then disoriented and demoralised by the LSSP (Revolutionary) or LSSP (R), which had broken from the LSSP and condemned its betrayal. The LSSP (R) refused to break from the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International led by Ernest Mandel, which provided the political cover for the LSSP's opportunism. The LSSP (R) blocked all attempts to discuss the international political roots of the LSSP's degeneration, leaving many of its followers, particularly the youth, frustrated but not silent.

The Shakthi group was formed to seek a way out of the political impasse. Keerthi, still a school student preparing for his university entrance exam, joined this group of young political activists. The group had a rather heterogeneous and centrist character and included in its ranks those who were critical of the LSSP (R) but from the standpoint of returning to the LSSP. That orientation was resisted by members of the group but it was only through the ICFI's intervention that the fundamental theoretical issues were clarified.

A visit in 1966 by Tony Banda, a leader of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the ICFI's British section, brought the youth in contact with Wilfred "Spike" Pereira. Comrade Spike was a veteran Trotskyist who had been waging a political battle within the LSSP (R), almost single-handedly, on the basis of the ICFI's struggle against Pabloite opportunism. Spike's documents, including a thorough critique of the centrist politics of the Shakthi group, and his courageous challenge to the United Secretariat's defence of Castro, were eye openers to these youth.

The young people who were drawn to the ICFI formed the Virodaya group. An intense study and discussion began of the documents of the ICFI, which was formed in 1953 in a struggle against an opportunist tendency inside the Fourth International led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. The Pabloites abandoned the fight for the political independence of the working class and capitulated to the Stalinist, Social Democratic

and bourgeois nationalist bureaucracies that dominated the workers' movement in different countries. The British SLL had just waged a protracted struggle against the political retreat of the Socialist Workers Party in the US which reunified with the Pabloites in 1963. In the struggle for theoretical clarity within the Virodaya group, Keerthi emerged as the foremost fighter for the ICFI's politics.

Although not yet recognised as a section, the Virodaya group closely followed the writings and work of the ICFI, particularly of the British SLL, and reacted with shock when an editorial written in February 1968 by Mike Banda eulogised the "protracted people's war" being waged by Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Mao Zedong as the "foremost exponent" of guerrilla warfare. Keerthi wrote to the SLL to protest over this glorification of Maoism and the subsequent edition included a brief note indicating the editorial expressed Banda's personal view. This live-and-let-live attitude to Banda's pro-Maoist inclinations was an indication that the SLL was retreating from the principled struggle it had waged against the SWP.

Keerthi showed the same theoretical rigour later that year at the founding congress of the RCL when he opposed a tendency to regard the newly formed party as the continuation of a national revolutionary current tracing its history through the LSSP, LSSP (R) and Shakthi group. He insisted that the continuity of Trotskyism lay in international struggle waged by the ICFI against Pabloism, outside of which no national grouping could maintain a consistently revolutionary orientation. The founding congress unanimously adopted a perspective to wage a revolutionary political fight throughout the Indian sub-continent on the basis of the Theory of Permanent Revolution. At the age of just 19, Keerthi was elected RCL general secretary.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) was founded in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). Less than three years later, Sri Lanka was plunged into a deep political crisis by an uprising of Sinhala rural youth launched by the petty-bourgeois Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) against the Sri Lanka Freedom Party-Lanka Sama Samaja Party-Communist Party coalition government that came to office in 1970.

As part of the struggle for the political independence of the working class, Keerthi wrote a lengthy critique of the JVP's Sinhala populist politics and its advocacy of the "armed struggle" that was serialised in the RCL's newspaper *Kamkaru Puwath*. The emergence of the JVP, and later various Tamil separatist groups, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was a by-product of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)'s abandonment of the struggle for proletarian internationalism.

Despite its publicly-stated differences with the JVP, the RCL defended the rural youth against the wave of state repression that followed. The coalition government banned the RCL's publications and forced the party underground. Two party members—Lakshman Weerakoon and L.G. Gunadasa—were arrested and killed in police custody. The RCL nevertheless waged a vigorous campaign in the working class to expose the LSSP and Communist Party (CP) by demanding that they break from the bourgeois government.

The entire Indian subcontinent was in turmoil. In East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, a liberation struggle erupted in 1971 against the Pakistani government. Keerthi immediately drafted a statement in which he explained that the crisis was a product of the irrational and regressive nation-state system established in the late 1940s by British imperialism, in collusion with the local bourgeoisie. Bengal had been carved up on communal lines into a Muslim East Pakistan and Hindu West Bengal, part of India.

The RCL statement opposed the reactionary Indian military intervention into Bangladesh by the Congress government of Indira Gandhi. "We call upon the Indian proletariat to reject the claim of the Indian bourgeoisie to be the liberators of East Bengal. The Trotskyists declare that the Indian

armed intervention in East Bengal had one and only one object. It was to prevent the struggle for Bangladesh from developing into a struggle for unification on a revolutionary basis, of the whole of Bengal," it stated.

Drawing a balance sheet of the previous 25 years of bourgeois rule in South Asia, the RCL declared: "Their (the Indian bourgeoisie's) absolute bankruptcy in the face of the historical tasks is proof of the central thesis of the Theory of Permanent Revolution of Trotsky that only the proletariat, drawing behind it the down-trodden rural masses, can solve these problems as part of the tasks of the socialist revolution."

Unknown to the RCL, British Socialist Labour League (SLL) leader M. Banda had written a statement supporting the Indian military intervention. When the SLL's newspaper *Workers Press* arrived in Colombo, Keerthi immediately wrote to ICFI Secretary Cliff Slaughter opposing the stance and pointing out that the Indian intervention sought to suppress any unified struggle by workers in East and West Bengal and uphold the reactionary state system established in 1947-48. However, as a thorough-going internationalist, Keerthi accepted the ICFI's political authority and withdrew the RCL's statement. "The clarification within the world party is the most important thing," he wrote. But the SLL never organised a discussion on the issue—another indication of its political backsliding, which was manifested particularly in its abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution.

The SLL also created considerable political confusion on the national question in Sri Lanka. The anti-Tamil discrimination of the coalition government generated widespread hostility among the island's Tamil minority, accompanied by the emergence of armed separatist groups. During a visit to Colombo in 1972, Cliff Slaughter insisted that the RCL withdraw its support for the right to self-determination of the oppressed Tamils. Slaughter's objection flowed not from the necessity of unifying Sinhala and Tamil workers, but from the false position that the Sri Lankan state established in 1948 had a "progressive character." In 1948, the Trotskyists of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) had opposed the phony formal independence granted by British imperialism in India and Sri Lanka.

By the late 1970s, the SLL's successor, the Workers Revolutionary Party, was openly adapting to bourgeois governments and groups such as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in the Middle East. In Sri Lanka, the WRP leadership swung 180 degrees and, without any discussion in the ICFI, instructed the RCL to give uncritical support to the "Tamil liberation struggle" and to the LTTE. As in the case of Slaughter's earlier position, the WRP's orientation was to sections of the bourgeoisie.

The WRP's opportunism created political difficulties for the RCL, but the party's program was always directed toward the working class. The RCL courageously opposed the discrimination and repression meted out to Tamils, opposed the civil war that erupted in 1983 and insisted that the only solution lay in the independent mobilisation of the working class, at the head of the oppressed masses, in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies.

Keerthi's internationalist outlook came to the fore in the 1985-86 split with the opportunist leadership of the WRP. He immediately agreed with the critique of the WRP's politics developed by Workers League (WL) National Secretary David North, including of its abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution in relation to the bourgeois regimes in the Middle East. The RCL joined with the WL, as well as the German and Australian sections of the ICFI, in defending the principles embodied in the ICFI's struggle against Pabloism.

In the aftermath of the split, Keerthi was reinvigorated, describing the period as one of the most fruitful and happy in his political career. He was able to collaborate freely with his international co-thinkers—which had not been possible when the WRP dominated the ICFI—and worked closely with North in drafting political documents. He wrote a detailed analysis of

the WRP's opportunist twists and turns on the Tamil question, and its political provocations aimed at destroying the RCL.

In Sri Lanka, the government, which confronted a deepening crisis as a result of the civil war, turned to India for assistance. The Indo-Lanka Accord, signed in July 1987, paved the way for the insertion of Indian troops, nominally as "peace-keepers," to supervise the ceasefire in the north of the island. As in the case of Bangladesh, India's intervention sought to crush the Tamil struggle, which threatened to trigger unrest in southern India, and to strengthen India's influence in Colombo.

The final ICFI statement that Keerthi worked on with North explained the historical roots of the unprecedented crisis of capitalist rule that had led to the emergence of the Tamil struggle and lay behind the Indian military intervention. It clarified a proletarian internationalist line on the national question and the necessity for unifying workers, Sinhala and Tamil, in the struggle for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the United Socialist States of South Asia.

The statement, written just a month before Keerthi's death, also pointed to the transformation taking place internationally in the various "national liberation" organisations, which increasingly based themselves on national and ethnic exclusivism rather than a broad inclusive struggle against imperialist oppression. The statement became the starting point for a careful reconsideration by the ICFI of the support previously given by the Marxist movement to the right of nations to self-determination.

Keerthi's untimely death was a terrible blow to the RCL and the ICFI, but his legacy has been invaluable to the further development of the international Trotskyist movement. With a new generation of workers and youth now coming into struggle in the Middle East, Asia and internationally, his life and works are part of the heritage that must be assimilated in the fight to unify the working class to abolish the bankrupt profit system. Above all, Keerthi's intransigent defence of the Theory of Permanent Revolution contains many profound lessons that must be absorbed by serious revolutionaries.



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