

Sri Lankan SEP meeting marks 25th anniversary of Keerthi Balasuriya's death

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka held a public meeting at Colombo New Town Hall on February 10 to mark the 25th anniversary of the death of Keerthi Balasuriya.

Comrade Keerthi, the founding general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, and a leader of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), died from a heart attack while he was working at the RCL office in Colombo on December 18, 1987, at the age of 39.

David North, the chairman of the International Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site* and national chairman of the US SEP, was the main speaker. He brought greetings from the ICFI and the American SEP. Greetings from the SEPs in Australia, UK and Canada were read from the chair.

About 200 workers, youths and professionals attended the meeting from Colombo and other areas. Among them were delegations of party members and supporters from the northern Jaffna peninsula and the central plantation districts.

Chairing the meeting, K. Ratnayake, SEP political committee member, called for one minute's silence to honour Keerthi's memory. He said the international political situation underlined the importance of the political principles for which Keerthi had fought, and the contributions he had made to the program and perspectives of the world Trotskyist movement.

Ratnayake explained: "Through the political intervention of the ICFI, Keerthi understood that the root cause of the 1964 betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), in entering into a bourgeois coalition with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), lay in Pabloite opportunism." From that clarification, Keerthi had grasped the necessity to resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership in the working class and continued that struggle until his untimely death.

Vilani Peiris, Keerthi's lifetime companion, pointed out that the SEP and ICFI had made an immense theoretical and political development in the 25 years since Keerthi's death. "The historical lessons of Keerthi's struggle against all types of opportunist and revisionist tendencies are embodied in the subsequent documents produced by the SEP and the ICFI."

Peiris said Keerthi had turned to a serious study of party history when the RCL was subjected to state repression and

faced political problems during the rural youth uprising led by the petty-bourgeois Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1971. Against the advice of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the then British section of the ICFI, which had begun abandoning the rich lessons of its own previous theoretical struggles, Keerthi had gone ahead to present his document on party history and draft perspectives. "He had a historical approach to every political issue," she emphasised.

SEP political committee member M. Thevarajah told the meeting: "The Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), then the British section of the ICFI, adapted to bourgeois nationalist regimes in Middle East in the latter part of the 1970s, abandoning Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. Despite this, the RCL, under Keerthi's leadership, fought for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers in Sri Lanka on a socialist program and perspective, against both the Sinhala and Tamil bourgeoisies."

ISSE convenor Kapila Fernando said: "Today the masses throughout the world, including young people, are being subject to relentless attacks on their living conditions by imperialist and national bourgeois governments as they offload the crisis of the global capitalist system on their backs. In these conditions, the historical lessons of the RCL's struggle to build the revolutionary party to unify workers in South Asia and internationally have become ever more crucial."

David North began by recounting the "unforgettable impact Keerthi made on all comrades who worked with him inside the ICFI." He recalled his first meeting with Keerthi, at an education camp in Britain organised by the SLL in 1972, where "Keerthi spoke with passion and intensity on the events that led to the defeat of 1923 revolution in Germany. It was impossible not to be impressed by the knowledge displayed by this young Marxist from far away Ceylon."

North explained that the WRP had blocked his early political collaboration with Keerthi. The British party had concealed, from the RCL and other sections of the ICFI, the detailed criticisms made by the US Workers League of the WRP's abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution and its opportunist alliances with bourgeois regimes in Middle East. The crisis that erupted within the WRP in the summer of 1985, shattered its organisational domination of the ICFI, facilitating

two years of close political collaboration between himself and Keerthi.

To explain the role of bourgeois nationalism, North quoted from M.N. Roy, an Indian delegate at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, held in November 1922, which debated the political issues raised by the mass anti-colonial uprisings in the aftermath of the October 1917 Russian Revolution. Roy, despite his later degeneration into an apologist for the Stalinist bureaucracy, had supported the theses of the Communist International on national liberation in the countries still under colonial domination.

Roy had said that when the great social uprisings took place at the end of World War I, they alarmed not only foreign imperialism but also the native bourgeoisies. Roy had added that communist parties were necessary to carry forward the struggle for national freedom from imperialism.

North posed the question: “If the treachery of the bourgeoisie was already apparent to Marxists in 1922—91 years ago—how much more advanced is this process of political degeneration and decay in the present period?”

Noting that global geo-politics had been transformed by the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union since Keerthi’s death, North commented: “But these world historical events, far from invalidating the political conceptions and principles on which Keerthi had worked, have imparted to them even greater historical significance.” He pointed out that the Chinese Maoist regime and various bourgeois nationalist regimes and movements, which were promoted by petty bourgeois “left” groups, including the Pabloites, as substitutes for the revolutionary role of the working class, had become open agents for global capital, powerfully vindicating the political principles for which Keerthi fought.

The speaker also emphasised: “We are witnessing before our eyes the eruption of imperialism in its most criminal form. Under the banner of the ‘war on terrorism,’ the US has become the principal instigator of terrorism and criminality all over the world.”

Referring to the upcoming 15th anniversary of the WWS, on February 14, North said: “The WWS has proven itself to be an enormously powerful instrument of revolutionary unification of the working class and we have no doubt that in months and years ahead it will become the instrument of organising world socialist revolution.”

North concluded: “Comrade Keerthi was a great pioneer of revolutionary Marxism. His life and work to this day leads the activities of the ICFI. He finds expression in what we write, what we do and he will be remembered in the future victories, which stand before our movement.”

SEP general secretary Wije Dias delivered the closing remarks. “We have organised this anniversary meeting not merely to consider the past 25 years,” he explained. “The aim of our meeting is to analyse the world political situation in

which we are living, and the developing class struggle.”

Dias provided a detailed account of how a group of young people, including Keerthi and himself, under the guidance of the ICFI, grappled with the political issues raised by the 1964 LSSP betrayal and founded the RCL as the section of ICFI in 1968. The RCL, led by Keerthi, had fought to expose the politics and class nature of various petty bourgeois organisations that claimed to oppose the LSSP’s betrayal. Keerthi’s masterpiece, *The Politics and Class Nature of the JVP*, had subjected the politics of this petty bourgeois organisation, to a detailed Marxist criticism, as part of the struggle to establish the RCL’s proletarian internationalist line.

Dias explained out how Keerthi was always very sensitive to the political issues within the party’s ranks. In the midst of the class upheavals leading to the 1976 general strike, Keerthi waged a very patient struggle against a pronounced tendency within the party to adapt to the spontaneous struggles of the working class. “Keerthi always emphasised to party cadre that the entry of the working class into struggle, rather than easing the tasks of revolutionaries, posed new challenges before the revolutionary party in dealing with the political issues, including those on program, raised by the struggle itself,” Dias said.

Dias examined the political and economic crisis of Sri Lankan bourgeois rule, the latest expression of which was the impeachment of Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake, in order to replace her with one of the president’s close confidantes. President Rajapakse, the speaker explained, was seeking to concentrate political power in the hands of his regime as part of police-state measures aimed at suppressing the inevitable opposition from the working class. Dias pointed out the treacherous role of the pseudo-left groups, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party, in defending the capitalist system by aligning with the right-wing United National Party.

The speaker said the SEP was fighting for the independent political intervention of the working class. “We call for a struggle to replace the Rajapakse regime by a workers’ and peasants’ government, based on the program of international socialism. This is the perspective for establishing a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and the world.”

Dias urged the audience to seriously study the political analyses of the SEP and ICFI, published on the WWS, including its Sinhala and Tamil language sections, and join the struggle to build the revolutionary party of the working class.



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