

Bala Tampoe (1922–2014): Socialist revolutionary turned class traitor

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The Sri Lankan political establishment, including President Mahinda Rajapakse, trade union bureaucrats, industrial and business magnates and the pseudo-lefts, has rallied together to sing the praises of Bala Tampoe, who died on September 1 at the age of 92. While he began his political life as a socialist revolutionary, Tampoe ended it as a union bureaucrat and political charlatan whose efforts were directed at suppressing the working class and propping up capitalist rule.

The eulogies that flowed after his death were not in appreciation of his revolutionary record but rather of his services to the ruling class over the past five decades. He held the post of secretary of the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) for 66 years, right up to his death. In the recent period, he was the most officially sought-after union bureaucrat in the island. Employers and government officials wanted his expertise in selling out strikes and struggles.

Conveying its “deepest sympathies,” the Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC), the island’s largest private sector business organisation, declared: “The EFC was fortunate to be associated with the CMU for many years. In fact, the oldest collective agreement, which has subsisted without a break is the collective agreement that the EFC entered into with the CMU from 1961. Bala Tampoe represented the CMU throughout this period.”

In his condolences, President Rajapakse hailed the same rotten deals signed by Tampoe as a contribution to maintaining industrial peace. “The most outstanding contribution to safeguard the rights of mercantile employees, through the collective agreement signed between the CMU and the Employers’ Federation of Ceylon, remains a landmark agreement and a valuable guide to many others in the field of trade unions,” he stated.

Tampoe not only “maintained the industrial peace” in relation to CMU members, but assisted other trade union bureaucracies in engineering and justifying their own grotesque betrayals. In the early 1990s, the government appointed him to the corporatist National Labor Advisory Council (NLAC), on which he served continuously.

Just weeks before his death, Tampoe performed one last stunt designed to fool workers. He walked out of the NLAC in “protest” over its failure to implement a workers’ charter—initially approved in the mid-1990s. For two decades, Tampoe and other union bureaucrats fraudulently dangled this piece of paper in front of workers as a “victory,” as they sold out one struggle after another.

It would be wrong, however, to view Tampoe as just another treacherous union leader. In his youth, he was a courageous and talented revolutionary fighter for the interests of the working class. The political degeneration of Tampoe, and others of his generation, was completely bound up with that of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which in 1964 abandoned the principles of Trotskyism and

joined the capitalist government of Sirima Bandaranaike.

At the age of just 17, Tampoe joined the LSSP in 1939, on the eve of World War II, as a university student. Under the impact of the war and Stalin’s support for the so-called democratic imperialist powers, including Britain, the LSSP leadership turned decisively toward Trotskyism, expelled the Stalinists from its ranks and played the central role in forming the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the all-India section of the Fourth International, in 1942.

Tampoe was a founding member of the BLPI and played a brave and active role in the underground party organisation in Sri Lanka, under conditions of wartime illegality. He held study classes on Trotskyism and gave lectures to workers near the Colombo racecourse. The BLPI took a revolutionary defeatist position and fought to mobilise workers in Sri Lanka and India against British colonial rule. Tampoe was involved in distributing party literature to British soldiers stationed on the island and sought to win them to Trotskyism.

Tampoe was a powerful orator who was fluent in three languages, English, Tamil and Sinhala. As young Trotskyists during the 1960s, the authors of this article witnessed him in full flight. He was able to draw on a vast store of stories and colloquial language, employing biting sarcasm and taunts against his opponents, and using his entire body almost in a dance to convince listeners of his arguments. Workers in their thousands would flock to his meetings to hear the man who could keep them transfixed for hours.

Following the war, Tampoe stood with the BLPI in opposition to a national opportunist faction led by N. M. Perera and Philippe Gunawardene that broke away to revive the old LSSP in 1945. He lost his job as a lecturer in the agriculture department’s training institute for participating in the 1947 general strike that was crushed by the British colonial rulers. He became a full-time worker for the BLPI and was nominated by the party to become CMU secretary in 1948.

In opposition to the LSSP, the BLPI opposed the fake independence granted by Britain in 1948 to the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and mobilised workers against it. However, formal independence opened up opportunities for sections of the middle class in the state apparatus, parliament and business, and generated significant pressures on the party. These were first expressed in the unprincipled reunification of the BLPI with the LSSP in 1950, without any clarification of previous fundamental differences.

The reunification was a symptom of a broader opportunist trend that was to emerge within the Fourth International under the leadership of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. Adapting to the post-war re-stabilisation of capitalism, Pablo and Mandel abandoned the struggle for the political independence of the working class and sought to

liquidate the sections of the Fourth International into “existing mass movements” dominated by Stalinism, Social Democracy, and, in countries like Sri Lanka, various forms of bourgeois nationalism.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was formed in 1953 to defend the principles of orthodox Trotskyism and wage a political struggle against Pabloism. Significantly, while the LSSP leaders criticised aspects of Pablo’s theories, they opposed the ICFI’s formation. The LSSP remained with the Pabloite International Secretariat. Tampoe, who was inducted into the political bureau of the LSSP central committee in mid-1953, took no stand against this decision, which opened the door for the LSSP’s political backsliding over the next decade.

With the blessing of the International Secretariat, which boasted of the LSSP being the largest Trotskyist party in the world, the LSSP increasingly came to judge its success by the number of its parliamentary seats and the size of its union membership. Its political trajectory was more and more toward popular frontism, in the form of deals with the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Increasingly, the LSSP adapted its program to the SLFP’s communal politics of Sinhala populism and anti-Tamil discrimination.

As a prominent trade union leader, Tampoe was in the midst of militant strike struggles, including against the SLFP governments that won office after the 1956 and 1960 elections. He led the protracted 1963 strike of port workers, who humiliated the government by defying its emergency declaration. The strike greatly exacerbated the political crisis of the SLFP government led by Sirima Bandaranaike, who faced a mounting movement of the working class centred on a broad trade union alliance led by the LSSP around a list of 21 demands.

Bandaranaike was forced to admit publicly that the country had become ungovernable and she needed the support of the LSSP. In 1964, she invited the LSSP leaders to join her government. They abandoned any semblance of political principles and sold out the 21 demands movement in return for three ministerial posts.

At the LSSP Congress that ratified the betrayal, Tampoe was one of the 159 delegates that voted against joining the government and walked out to form the LSSP (Revolutionary). At the same time, Tampoe, as one of the main LSSP-R leaders, vehemently opposed any discussion, particularly with the ICFI, of the political roots of the LSSP’s degeneration.

The ICFI insisted that the overriding responsibility for the betrayal rested not with the LSSP leadership, but with the Pabloite international that had aided and abetted the LSSP’s opportunist adaptations to national bourgeois rule over the previous decade. The betrayal was a striking confirmation of the struggle waged by the British Socialist Labour League (SLL) against the US Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which broke from the ICFI in 1963 and rejoined the Pabloites, claiming that the fundamental differences of the 1953 split had receded.

The ICFI insisted that the LSSP’s entry into the Bandaranaike government marked the entry of Pabloite revisionism into the direct service of imperialism. As a result, Trotskyism would only be revived in Sri Lanka through a thoroughgoing break from Pabloism on the basis of historical lessons of the struggle of the ICFI.

The LSSP-R leaders remained with the Pabloite United Secretariat, which sanctioned their continuing opportunism. In Tampoe’s case, this involved a marked adaptation to trade union politics and the rejection of any political struggle to overthrow capitalism. As a union bureaucrat, Tampoe employed his skills and revolutionary past to

dupe workers and sell out their struggles. Under his leadership, the LSSP-R became little more than an adjunct of the CMU and mouthpiece for syndicalism. Nevertheless, the Pabloites continued to recognise it as their official section in Sri Lanka until they finally shut it down in 1981.

Increasingly Tampoe veered sharply to the right. In 1967, he created something of a public scandal when he participated in a reception at the German Embassy to honour Chancellor Kurt Kiesinger, a former Nazi, while refusing to join a 300,000-strong strike by plantation workers belonging to the DWC union—part of a union alliance led by Tampoe.

During the same year, Tampoe visited the US at the invitation of the CIA-funded Asia Foundation, which paid his expenses. During the trip, he had a private audience with US Defence Secretary Robert McNamara, who was infamous for the brutal prosecution of the Vietnam War. The United Secretariat felt compelled to appoint a special commission to investigate Tampoe’s alleged connections with the CIA, but then swept its findings under the carpet.

Tampoe played a particularly treacherous role in derailing the 1976 general strike. Under the banner of “non-political trade unionism,” he opposed any political struggle against the SLFP-led coalition government, opening the door for the return of the right-wing United National Party (UNP), which rapidly implemented open market policies. Opposition in the working class to the destruction of living standards erupted in a general strike movement of public sector workers in 1980, which Tampoe refused to support, paving the way for the sacking of 100,000 workers.

Tampoe was especially hostile to the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), and its principled struggle, as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, for Trotskyism. He expelled RCL members from the CMU on several occasions when they initiated discussion among union members of the RCL/SEP program and questions of principle and history.

While the Colombo political establishment is paying tribute to Tampoe, the wretched union bureaucrat who helped prop up moribund capitalism, we prefer to remember the young revolutionary fighter against imperialist war, colonialism and national bourgeois rule, and the tragic consequences that flowed from his rejection of the struggle for program and principle. His evolution underscores the necessity for the new generation of revolutionaries to be grounded on the strategic lessons of the international working class that is only embodied in the ICFI, the international Trotskyist movement.

The authors also recommend:

The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
[26 March 2012]



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