

“You are a man of unimpeachable revolutionary integrity”

On the 75th birthday of Sri Lankan Trotskyist leader Wije Dias

David North
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On September 3, the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka celebrated the seventy-fifth birthday of its general secretary, Wije Dias. We publish below the greetings sent to Comrade Dias by David North, the national chairman of the SEP in the United States.

Dear Comrade Wije,

As your comrades in Sri Lanka gather to celebrate your seventy-fifth birthday, they are joined by your comrades and friends in the Socialist Equality Party in the United States and the sections of the International Committee throughout the world, who are filled with profound appreciation, respect and gratitude for all that you have done for the cause of the Fourth International, world socialism and the liberation of humanity from capitalist exploitation, oppression and violence.

But even as we celebrate, it is not possible to avoid reflecting on the significance of the life you have lived within the context of the historical epoch that determined the framework of your social experience and political decisions. The year of your birth, 1941, was a fateful one. The Second World War was underway. Imperialism was providing a horrifying demonstration of the barbarism of which it was capable. Little more than two months before you were born, the Nazi regime in Germany had invaded the Soviet Union. By the end of 1941, Japan, Britain and the United States were engaged in a ferocious struggle to determine which imperialist power would achieve mastery over the vast Asian continent. But even as these forces contended brutally for power, the masses throughout Asia were stirring. They were not willing to passively wait for the war to decide which imperialist power would emerge as their new overlord. Rather, the masses sought the overthrow of the entire regime of colonial oppression.

But how was this to be achieved? The various nationalist leaders of the Asian bourgeoisie counseled caution and patience. They feared, above all, that the mass struggle against colonialism might assume a socialist dimension that would threaten their own class interests. Nowhere in Asia did this class-based fear find more explicit expression than in India, where Gandhi's pacifism was directed, above all, against the revolutionary mobilization of the working class. For their part, the Indian Stalinists, following the line of the Soviet bureaucracy, insisted that the working class subordinate itself to the political domination of the bourgeois Congress Party, and, still further, do nothing that threatened British imperialist interests as long as the war continued.

In opposition to the program of the bourgeois nationalists and their Stalinist allies, however, another perspective was being raised before the masses: that of permanent revolution. In July 1939, on the eve of the outbreak of World War II, Leon Trotsky addressed “An Open Letter to the Workers of India.” He wrote:

The Indian bourgeoisie is incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle. They are closely bound up with and dependent upon British capitalism. They tremble for their own property. They stand in fear of the masses. They seek compromises with British imperialism no matter what the price and lull the Indian masses with hopes of reforms from above. The leader and prophet of this bourgeoisie is Gandhi. A fake leader and a false prophet! ...

The Indian people must divorce their fate from the very outset from that of British imperialism. The oppressors and the oppressed stand on opposite sides of the trenches. No aid whatsoever to the slave owners! On the contrary, those immense difficulties, which the war will bring in its wake, must be utilized so as to deal a mortal blow to all the ruling classes. That is how the oppressed classes and peoples in all countries should act, irrespective of whether Messrs. Imperialists don democratic or fascist masks.

To realize such a policy a *revolutionary party*, basing itself on the vanguard of the proletariat, is necessary. Such a party does not yet exist in India. The Fourth International offers this party its program, its experience, its collaboration. The basic conditions for this party are: complete independence from imperialist democracy, complete independence from the Second and Third Internationals and complete independence from the national Indian bourgeoisie.

These words, written in faraway Mexico, were to exert immense influence on the Indian sub-continent, and especially in Ceylon, where the principles advanced in Trotsky's Open Letter provided the essential political orientation to the young leaders of the new Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). In 1942, the LSSP became a section of the Fourth International. This historic decision, which was taken during the first year of your life, laid the foundations for the political and intellectual culture that was to exercise such a profound influence on yourself and an entire generation of Ceylonese youth, who flocked to the banner of the BLPI (Bolshevik Leninist Party of India) and LSSP between the late 1940s and early 1960s.

As you know, Comrade Wije, I have asked you many times to relate your experiences in the youth movement of the LSSP during the fateful years of the early 1960s. You witnessed the retreat of Colvin de Silva and others from the revolutionary principles that they had espoused. The betrayal of the LSSP in 1964—its entry into the coalition government of Bandaranaike—was the first great political test that brought your political “youth” to an end. Against and in opposition to your elders, you repudiated their capitulation and set about to uphold the banner of genuine Trotskyism in Sri Lanka.

The years that followed were immensely challenging. The betrayal of

the LSSP was of a magnitude that generated disorientation and discouragement. The International Pabloite organization—whose revisions of the Trotskyist program from 1953 on had legitimized and facilitated the growth of opportunism in the LSSP—did everything possible to block a serious analysis of the roots of the betrayal in Ceylon. This was the role assigned by the Pabloite leader Ernest Mandel and his cohorts to the newly-formed LSSP (Revolutionary).

Despite the difficult conditions, the critical work of political clarification proceeded. With the important assistance of Wilfred “Spike” Pereira, the International Committee of the Fourth International was able to make contact with you and others in the Shakthi group—principally Comrades Ratnayake, Keerthi, and Wicks—who were seeking to break out of the LSSP (R)’s miasma of centrist evasions. Of course, the process was complicated and contradictory. But between 1966 and 1968, the struggle for the defense and recovery of revolutionary principles culminated in the foundation of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka—as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

Having already passed through this immense political experience, you were still a young man in your twenties. But there was to be no respite from the challenges that confronted the RCL. Again and again, the party leadership had to demonstrate its political firmness. The detailed enumeration of these experiences would constitute nothing less than a political history of Sri Lanka, the Asian sub-continent, and, of course, the development of the Fourth International over the past half-century. The events that come immediately to mind are 1) the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) uprising of 1971, in which the RCL—notwithstanding its unbridgeable differences with this Maoist organization and at great risk to itself—defended the JVP and the rural youth under its influence against savage government repression; 2) the vicious counter-offensive against the Sri Lankan working class that followed the victory of the United National Party in the 1977 elections; 3) the eruption of the civil war in 1983, in which the RCL stood alone in its opposition to both the racist anti-Tamil policies of the Colombo regime and the bourgeois-nationalist and separatist program of the LTTE; and 4) the violent campaign in the late 1980s unleashed by the JVP, which targeted the RCL because of its unrelenting opposition to Sinhala chauvinism.

Between 1971 and 1985, the RCL had to confront this unending succession of political crises under conditions in which the British Socialist Labour League (SLL)-Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) was in the process of repudiating the Trotskyist foundations of the International Committee. To be blunt, the WRP leadership of Healy, Banda and Slaughter had never forgotten or forgiven the correct and devastating criticism made by Comrade Keerthi, with the support of the Political Committee of the RCL, of the SLL’s opportunist support for the 1971 invasion of East Pakistan, ordered by the Indian government of Indira Gandhi.

The Workers Revolutionary Party sought to prevent a principled exchange of political views within the International Committee. The Revolutionary Communist League was kept completely in the dark about the criticisms of the political line of the WRP raised by the Workers League between 1982 and 1984. The WRP leadership ignored my specific request that the RCL be informed of and invited to a meeting of the ICFI in February 1984, which was called to discuss the differences between the Workers League and Workers Revolutionary Party. It is obvious that Healy, Banda and Slaughter resorted to this unprincipled maneuver because they assumed that the RCL leadership would be in agreement with the Workers League’s criticisms of the WRP leaders’ abandonment of the theory of permanent revolution and their reactionary alliances with bourgeois nationalists.

However, the eruption of a political crisis inside the WRP in 1985 brought its reactionary domination of the International Committee to an

end.

The meeting of IC delegates in London, in October 1985, marked a new and immensely significant stage in the history of the Trotskyist movement. What we have characterized as the protracted civil war within the Fourth International, which began with the issuing of the Open Letter in 1953, in opposition to the revisionist insurgency led by Pablo and Mandel, culminated in the rout of the anti-Trotskyist forces within the International Committee.

In the course of the split with the WRP opportunists, and in its immediate aftermath, Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya played a critical and decisive role within the leadership of the International Committee. However, his exceptional contribution reflected the immense experience and political firmness of the RCL leadership and cadre, derived from the previous decades of struggle for Trotskyism.

It is for this reason that the RCL was able to endure the untimely and totally unexpected loss of Comrade Keerthi in December 1987. His death, at the age of 39, was a cruel and tragic loss to the Revolutionary Communist League and the International Committee. The fact that the RCL was able to withstand the impact of Keerthi’s death—in the midst of civil war, the attacks of the JVP assassins, and continuous government persecution—was, by any objective standard, a demonstration of the RCL leadership’s extraordinary political strength. But it must also be acknowledged—and there is not a single comrade in either the RCL/SEP or the International Committee who would challenge this judgment—that you, Comrade Wije, played the decisive role in maintaining the unity of the party, upholding its revolutionary internationalist orientation, and leading it forward.

More than 45 years have passed since we first met. We have worked together closely for the past 30 years. I cannot adequately convey in words the depth of my respect for you as a comrade, a fighter and a human being. I am sure that you have your share of faults, but excuse me if I confess that none of them comes to mind at the moment. You have been intransigent in your defense of Marxist principles. During a stint in jail, even the prison warden was impressed by your devotion to the cause of socialist revolution!

Throughout Sri Lanka, you are respected—even by political opponents—as a man of unimpeachable revolutionary integrity. You are the only political leader in Sri Lanka who commands the respect and admiration of the oppressed in both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. They recognize that only the Socialist Equality Party fights for the unity of the entire working class, and opposes every form of racist sectarianism. In the course of political struggles that span more than a half century, and in the face of countless hardships—including the loss of your beloved wife, Comrade Piyaseeli—you have held high the banner of the Fourth International.

There is no doubting that this birthday is a milestone. No matter how one juggles the figures, 75 is a significant number of years. But with age came ever-greater wisdom, and some years back you foreswore the two greatest threats to your longevity—riding a motorcycle and smoking cigarettes. And so we have every reason to expect that you will remain in the front ranks of the revolutionary struggle for years to come.

Your comrade forever,

David North



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