

On the 80th birthday of Sri Lankan Trotskyist leader Wije Dias

David North
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On August 27, the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka held an online meeting celebrating the eightieth birthday of its general secretary, Wije Dias. The following greetings were delivered by David North, chairperson of the WSWs International Editorial Board and national chairperson of the Socialist Equality Party (US).

Dear Comrade Wije,

On behalf of the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party in the United States, permit me to extend to you the warmest and heartiest congratulations on your eightieth birthday.

I cannot help but adopt a somewhat formal tone, because your birthday is more than an occasion for the celebration of a personal milestone. It is at the same time a milestone in the history of the Sri Lankan working class and the world Trotskyist movement.

A vast historical experience is concentrated in your life. The chapters of your political biography encompass the most critical events of the international class struggle and their conscious expression in the history of the Fourth International. Your life is embedded profoundly in these events, but your relation to history has been that of a highly conscious and active participant.

It is true, of course, that you are a product of your times, acting “under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” But you have acted upon those circumstances, seeking throughout your six decades of political activity as a Trotskyist to direct events in accordance with historical necessity. You have fought to divert the spontaneous struggles of the working class away from the “line of least resistance”—that is, away from the path of opportunist accommodation that has led to so many defeats—and

toward the goal of the conquest of political power.

As a consequence, you were compelled by objective conditions to conduct your work in opposition to the dominant political tendencies of the times: the openly capitalist parties and their political accomplices among the Stalinists, Maoists, bourgeois nationalists, and Pabloite organizations. But as history has proved, your work, in revolutionary opposition, was based on a correct understanding of the laws of the class struggle.

You were correct in your opposition to the entry of the LSSP into the coalition government of Bandaranaike in 1964; you were correct, in opposing the unprincipled centrist vacillations of the LSSP(R), to establish the Revolutionary Communist League—forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka—as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1968; the RCL was correct in its rejection of the petty-bourgeois nationalism of the JVP in the critical period of 1970-71; the RCL leadership was correct when it criticized, in 1971, the British SLL’s endorsement of India’s intervention in East Pakistan (anticipating the future criticisms of the WRP’s opportunism by the Workers League); the RCL was correct in its intransigent opposition to the racist war launched by the Sinhalese bourgeoisie in 1983 and in its rejection of the bankrupt nationalism of the Tamil Tigers; and the Sri Lankan section was correct in its opposition to the Indo-Lankan Accord of 1987.

The long record of revolutionary opposition contained, however, an immensely creative and positive content. It clearly indicated and explained the correct political path.

The decisive historical test of the RCL came in 1985, when it opposed the opportunism of the WRP and played a critical role in defense of the International Committee of the Fourth International. While Comrade

Keerthi Balasuriya, as general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League, provided exceptional and far-sighted leadership to the struggle within the International Committee, his work received and was vastly strengthened by your unwavering support.

Your critical role within the Revolutionary Communist League was well known to the International Committee. That is why, when confronted with the sudden and tragic loss of Comrade Keerthi in December 1987, it was recognized you had to assume leadership of the Sri Lankan section. And that is a responsibility that you have carried out for the last 34 years in a manner that has won for you not only the immense respect but also the deep affection of your comrades in Sri Lanka and throughout the International Committee.

We first met in July 1972, at a summer school organized by the Socialist Labour League in Britain. I especially recall that you undertook the difficult task of translating Keerthi's contributions, delivered in Sinhala, into English. In the decade that followed we met occasionally in Britain, but under conditions that, unfortunately, did not allow for extensive political discussion. It was not until November 1986, when I traveled to Sri Lanka for the first time, that we had the opportunity to discuss political issues at length and in a more politically hospitable environment.

In the aftermath of Comrade Keerthi's death, our collective work assumed a close and systematic character. Our political relationship developed into a personal friendship that I have treasured. You are a man who exemplifies the finest attributes of a genuine revolutionary: unquestionable integrity, determination, honesty, objectivity, courage, personal kindness, optimism and a wonderful sense of humor.

On the occasion of your last major personal milestone, birthday number 75, I wrote:

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 come 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 racialist 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.

The sentiments that I expressed in 2016 are reinforced by the experiences of the past five years, as you have remained a powerful voice and presence within the Sri Lankan section and the International Committee.

Comrade Wije: you have secured for yourself an honored place in the history of the Fourth International and in the hearts of your comrades throughout the world.

With deep affection,

David



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