

# Thousands pay their respects at funeral of veteran Sri Lankan Trotskyist Wije Dias

Our correspondents

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On Saturday, nearly one thousand family members, comrades and supporters gathered at the Borella Cemetery in Colombo from all parts of the country to pay their last respects to the late comrade Wije Dias, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The casket with Wije's remains was taken to the cemetery in a solemn procession of 500, including SEP members and sympathisers, marching the two kilometres from the funeral parlor. The Internationale was played throughout the march.

Wije Dias died on the morning of July 27 from a massive heart attack, just one month before his 81st birthday. His remains were kept at the Jayaratne Respect Home in Borella, Colombo from Thursday morning for those who wished to pay their last respects.

He was a founding member of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the predecessor of the SEP. After the untimely demise of Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding General Secretary of the RCL, in December 1987, Wije took up the responsibility of general secretary until last May when he was elected to the new position of party chairman.

Over three days, nearly 2,000 people from all parts of the island came to pay their respects, including SEP members, supporters, family members, artists, intellectuals, workers and students. Groups from the North and South and the Central plantation districts traveled to the funeral despite serious transport disruptions caused by acute fuel shortages.

Comrade Wije's death and his funeral was reported with photos on several private as well as state television channels in their prime-time news together with brief comments on Wije's political role. The major newspapers in Sinhala, Tamil and English also published prominent reports which all referred to Dias as an intransigent fighter who dedicated his adult life to Trotskyism, and noted the SEP and its relationship to the ICFI.

The *Daily Mirror*, a widely circulated English-language newspaper, headlined its report "Legendary Trotskyist Wije Dias no more." The *Sri Lanka Mirror* declared: "Sri Lankan Trotskyist icon passes away."

The funeral procession led by party members dressed in red attracted the attention of many on the roadsides. A banner at the front of the procession featured his photo with the inscription

"Our Revolutionary Salute to Comrade Wije Dias, Chairman of the SEP, the Sri Lankan Section of ICFI." Members of the health, education and plantation action committees carried banners bearing messages of condolence.

The entire funeral was broadcast live on the SEP Facebook page which had an audience of nearly 1,000, including from the US, Europe, Australia, India, the Middle East and several other countries. So far, over 3,000 people have watched the video and nearly 450 people have shared it. Many people, including members of the SEP's sister parties, commented, adding their messages of condolence and revolutionary salute.

K. Ratnayake, a long-time SEP member, Sri Lankan WSWs national editor and a very close comrade of Dias, chaired the meeting. In opening, he referred to the RCL's founding in 1968 in the wake of the betrayal by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) of the principles of socialist internationalism when it entered the bourgeois coalition government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964.

"When we look back at the period around 1968, it was not a very easy time politically. The wave of bankrupt, reactionary coalition politics—of socialism via parliamentary road—was spreading. At that time, Maoism, Castroism, Guevarism and the armed struggle were the political fashion internationally. Marxism and the revolutionary role of the working class were rejected. These ideologies were echoed in Sri Lanka. Keerthi, Wije and other comrades who founded the RCL in 1968 rejected these anti-Marxist theories and based the party on Trotskyism, the continuation of Marxism, which was defended only by the International Committee."

Ratnayake said that Wije's death was a great loss for Sri Lankan section as well as the ICFI, adding: "But we pledge to honor him by fighting relentlessly for the Trotskyist perspective to which he devoted his entire life." He explained that Wije saw the struggles of the workers, youth and oppressed in Sri Lanka over the last three months very optimistically and was committed to the last minute of his life to arm and lead the SEP politically amid those developments.

David North, chairman of the US SEP and the WSWs International Editorial Board, addressed the gathering via the internet. He began his remarks by expressing his regret at not being able to be in Colombo as comrade Wije was being laid to

rest. All those who are gathered at Dias's funeral, North said, "are aware that they are in the presence of history." He continued: "It can be declared unequivocally that Wije Dias played a monumental role, spanning sixty years, in the struggle to build the Trotskyist movement."

North said that Wije and a remarkable cadre of young Trotskyists, led by Keerthi Balasuriya, had to "swim against the stream" in founding the RCL. But Wije, Keerthi, and their comrades, North said, "did so with unwavering confidence in the power of historical truth, the correctness of the perspective and program of the Fourth International, and the revolutionary role of the working class in Sri Lanka and throughout the world."

The full text of David North's tribute is published here.

SEP Political Committee member, Vilani Peiris, described the crucial role played by Dias in the formation of the RCL. She explained that Dias alongside with Keerthi Balasuriya drew brilliantly on the political guidance and decisive intervention made by the ICFI, which explained that the root of the great betrayal by the LSSP lay not nationally, but internationally in Pabloite revisionism.

Saman Gunadasa, SEP Assistant Secretary, explained that Comrade Wije worked very enthusiastically to prepare the party for the current class struggle developing in Sri Lanka. He paid tribute to Wije's untiring efforts in his last days—his active involvement in the Third National Congress of the SEP in Sri Lanka and his close collaboration with the ICFI in producing the SEP's decisive latest statement entitled "For a Democratic & Socialist Congress Workers and Rural Masses." Saman concluded his speech pledging that the party would take forward the struggle for the Fourth International, as Wije had done and would have wished.

Speaking in Tamil, SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah said: "I met Wije in Jaffna in 1976, just two months after I joined the party. He came there to take theoretical classes on Lenin's book *What Is to Be Done*. He insisted that the working class was the only revolutionary class and the socialist consciousness could be provided only by a revolutionary party. He insisted on the role of the Marxist Party for the victory of socialist revolution. After 45 years we can see how much that was been vindicated..."

"Amid the numerous nationalist tendencies, comrade Wije, with the RCL's determined young comrades led by Keerthi, firmly fought for the internationalist policies based on the understanding that the working class is the international revolutionary class. We should learn from the life of comrade Wije and dedicate ourselves to bringing the working class to power."

Janarathi, Wije's twelve-year-old granddaughter, addressed the assembly on behalf of his family. She said that grandfather was an amazing person who constantly cared about her and that what everyone else had said about him inspired her to be as determined as he was. "Throughout his efforts to make a

workers' revolution, he still made time for his family and made time for me," she said. On behalf of the family, she thanked all who participated in the occasion.

Kapila Fernando, an SEP Political Committee member and convener of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, said: "It should be mentioned in particular that all comrades in the youth movement received immense guidance from comrade Wije in organising public meetings and in writing articles for the WSWs about the attacks on public education, youth unemployment and other cultural issues." In some cases, he wrote the necessary analysis himself to develop the youth movement, drawing on his vast knowledge and political sharpness.

Kapila recalled that Wije was arrested in 1986, when he was addressing a meeting in Chilaw defending free education. He was kept in jail for six weeks, along with two other party members, by the police as part of the repression unleashed by the then United National Party (UNP) regime.

"All of us in the youth movement considered it a great privilege to work with him," he said.

Deepal Jayasekara, SEP general secretary, delivered the concluding remarks. He said starting with the fight against the betrayal of the LSSP, comrade Wije's commitment to the principles of Trotskyist socialist internationalism remained unbroken throughout his entire political life. "In the midst of all the difficulties that our party faced as the RCL from 1968 to 1996, and since then as the SEP in Sri Lanka and globally due to the malign nature of capitalist class rule, he fought for those principles without hesitation and with indomitable courage."

Explaining the decisiveness of Wije's leadership in advancing the SEP struggle to build the unity of the Sinhala-Tamil working class, Jayasekara said: "Comrade Wije committed himself very firmly to the struggle to unify the working class against the Sinhala chauvinism of the Colombo government, as well as the Tamil separatism of the LTTE..."

"Comrade Wije will be given the respect he deserves by building the SEP as the mass revolutionary party in Sri Lanka and the ICFI internationally and advancing the socialist internationalism to which he devoted his entire adult life."

The funeral gathering ended with singing of the Internationale.



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