

David North's tribute to Wije Dias

David North
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The following is the tribute delivered online by David North, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (US), at the funeral of Sri Lankan SEP chairman Wije Dias held in Colombo on Saturday July 30. Comrade Dias died at home on July 27 of a heart attack just one month short of his 81st birthday. A report of the funeral can be found [here](#).

Dear Comrades,

I regret that I am not able to be with you in Colombo as Comrade Wije Dias is being laid to rest. But the physical distance does not lessen the profound sense of loss that we feel today, nor can it detract from the powerful bonds of solidarity that exist between the members of the International Committee throughout the world and the section in Sri Lanka, which Comrade Wije has led for the last 35 years, one third of a century.

All those who are gathered here today to bid farewell to Wije Dias are aware that they are in the presence of history. It can be declared unequivocally that Wije Dias played a monumental role, spanning sixty years, in the struggle to build the Trotskyist movement. When a biography of Wije is written, it will necessarily encompass the entire modern history of Sri Lanka. He was 22 years old when the Lanka Sama Samaja Party betrayed the Marxist-Trotskyist principles upon which it had been founded and entered the bourgeois coalition government of Bandaranaike. Wije was to devote the remaining 58 years of his life to overcoming the tragic consequences of that betrayal and re-establishing the authority of genuine revolutionary Trotskyism in the working class.

Wije and a remarkable cadre of young Trotskyists, led by Keerthi Balasuriya, founded the Revolutionary Communist League—predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party—in 1968. In the defense of Trotskyist principles, the RCL was compelled, as Trotsky once described such circumstances, “to swim against the

stream.” But Wije, Keerthi, Ratnayake and their comrades 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.

Wije was an extraordinarily modest man, who—as far as I can recall—never sought to call attention to his own contributions to the leadership of the party. But as the RCL confronted the shock of Comrade Keerthi's untimely death on December 18, 1987, Wije accepted the responsibility of assuming the leadership of the Revolutionary Communist League. He became national secretary amidst the bloody war unleashed by the Colombo regime against the Tamil people. Under his leadership, the RCL-SEP remained unyielding in its opposition to the Sinhala racism promoted by the Colombo regime and the JVP, while refusing to make any political concessions to the petty-bourgeois nationalism of the LTTE.

During virtually the entirety of his political work, Comrade Wije had to fight under conditions in which the reactionary forces were on the offensive and the working class—betrayed by the LSSP, the trade unions, and other opportunist organizations—was in retreat.

But in the final months of his life, Comrade Wije witnessed the resurgence of the working class. He welcomed with enthusiasm the opportunity to go on the offensive against the ruling class. Notwithstanding his declining health, Wije summoned all his remaining strength, and called upon his vast experience, to provide political leadership to the powerful spontaneous movement.

As recently as July 9, Comrade Wije participated in a meeting of the Political Committee of the Socialist Equality Party to formulate its response to the crisis of the Rajapakse regime. He spoke out powerfully against providing any political support to an interim capitalist

government and argued in support of the party issuing a call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, to lay the basis for the transfer of state power to the working class.

Wije devoted the final days of his life working closely with the Political Committee and the International Committee in the drafting a major programmatic statement, which was posted on the *World Socialist Web Site* on July 20. Explaining why the SEP rejected any support to or participation in an “interim government,” the statement invoked a lifetime of political experience:

In refusing to take part in the talks on forming an interim government, the SEP drew on the bitter political lessons of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party’s catastrophic 1964 betrayal of the essential political principles of Trotskyism. In the midst of an economic and political crisis, and confronting the powerful “21 demands” movement of the working class, Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike, the leader of the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party, turned to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) leaders to prop up capitalist rule. The entry of the LSSP into the bourgeois “Sinhalese First” government of Bandaranaike not only marked the end of the “21 demands” movement. It demoralised the masses, promoted ethno-linguistic strife over class struggle, and paved the way for the domination of reactionary communal politics and decades of civil war.

The SEP has not and never will go down the LSSP’s road of betrayal. We reject all forms of direct and indirect support to capitalist governments. The predecessor of the SEP, the Revolutionary Communist League, was founded in 1968 as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in direct opposition to the LSSP’s repudiation of socialist internationalism and independent class politics—the pillars of the struggle for workers’ power.

In what proved to be the final political statement

issued under Wije’s leadership, only seven days before his death, the Socialist Equality Party declared:

We issue a special appeal to workers in India and throughout South Asia, as well as internationally, for a joint struggle for a socialist future for humanity. We call on militant workers and youth in Sri Lanka to join the SEP and take your place in the revolutionary struggle for socialist internationalism.

How appropriate it is that Comrade Wije should have brought his long life to a conclusion with a powerful appeal for “the revolutionary struggle for socialist internationalism.”

Comrade Wije Dias died in the midst of struggle, upholding in old age, and with undiminished passion, the ideals of his youth. His legacy—of courage, commitment to Trotskyist principles, and devotion to socialism—will provide an inspiring example to the working class in the great class battles that will decide the fate of mankind.

Long Live the Memory of Wije Dias

Long Live the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka

Long Live the International Committee of the Fourth International

David North



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[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)