

Thirty five years since the death of Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya

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19 December 2022**

Last Sunday marked 35 years since the death of comrade Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka. On December 18, 1987, Keerthi died after a massive heart attack while working at the RCL office in Colombo on an important political document dealing with 1985–86 split in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). He was just 39 years. Had he lived, Keerthi would be looking forward to his 75th birthday.

Keerthi's premature death deprived the world Trotskyist movement of one of its most prominent leaders in the struggle to build the revolutionary leadership of the working class based on international socialism. As David North, then national secretary of the Workers League (WL), the forerunner of the SEP in the US, explained in a public lecture delivered in Montreal on February 6, 1993, Keerthi was "one of the finest representatives of the great school of revolutionary Marxism as it was taught by Lenin, Trotsky and Luxemburg."

Although the fatal heart attack ended his life prematurely, the enduring legacy of comrade Keerthi's political and theoretical work during his two decades as a leader in the Trotskyist movement has lived on through the RCL/SEP and the ICFI. His political insights are crucial for the current generation of workers and youth who are coming into revolutionary struggle against the crisis-ridden capitalist system globally.

Keerthi was one of a group of politically radicalised youth who were looking for serious answers to immense political and theoretical issues raised by the historic betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which in 1964 joined a bourgeois coalition government with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). This was the first time that a party claiming to be Trotskyist had joined a capitalist government.

The ICFI played the central role in explaining that the political roots of the LSSP's betrayal lay in the Pabloite opportunism that emerged within the Fourth International in early 1950s. This revisionist tendency, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity of building the Trotskyist movement as the leadership of the working class to carry out socialist revolution. Instead, Pablo and Mandel turned to other class forces—the Stalinist, Social Democratic and bourgeois nationalist parties—and promoted them as the means for achieving socialism. The ICFI was founded in 1953 to defend the fundamental principles of Trotskyism against Pabloite opportunism.

For over a decade, the Pabloites not only condoned but facilitated and encouraged the LSSP's adaptation to the bourgeois nationalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its political backsliding into the mire of parliamentary cretinism and trade union politics. Following the LSSP's betrayal, the ICFI intervened among politically advanced sections of workers and youth to explain the critical role of Pabloism in understanding the LSSP's degeneration—its roots were not in Colombo, but in Paris, where the Pabloite United Secretariat was headquartered.

Keerthi responded enthusiastically to the principled political intervention of the ICFI and emerged as the foremost fighter for Trotskyism among the group of mainly young people drawn to the ICFI. The founding of the RCL as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in June 1968 marked an important milestone in the history of Fourth International.

Keerthi, at the age of 19, was elected general secretary of the RCL. At the founding congress, in opposition to a tendency that viewed the new party as the unification of a national revolutionary current in Sri Lanka with the ICFI, Keerthi insisted that the continuity of Trotskyism lay in the international arena in the ICFI's struggle against Pabloism.

Just three years after its founding, the RCL faced its first serious political test. The petty-bourgeois Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led an adventurist uprising of Sinhala rural youth in April 1971 against the SLFP-LSSP-Stalinist Communist Party (CP) coalition government that had come to power the previous year. The government responded by unleashing a bloody crackdown that slaughtered around 20,000 youth and imprisoned many more.

Keerthi had prepared the party through a book-length analysis of JVP's politics and class nature, establishing the RCL's proletarian internationalist line against the JVP's petty-bourgeois nationalism. The emergence of the JVP, based on Sinhala populism, Maoism and glorification of the armed struggle, as well as, at a later point, the emergence of various armed Tamil nationalist groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was the by-product of the LSSP's abandonment of proletarian internationalism.

At the same time, despite its publicly stated political differences with the JVP, the RCL took a principled position in waging a campaign in the working class to defend rural youth against the murderous repression of the coalition government. In doing so, the RCL demonstrated in practice the fundamental precept of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution: that the working class alone is capable of defending democratic rights.

Keerthi's firmness on the principles of proletarian internationalism and opposition to bourgeois nationalism was again demonstrated in the RCL's position on the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971. Mike Banda, general secretary of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), then the British section of the ICFI, published a statement in the ICFI's name giving "critical support" to the Indian decision to send its army into East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) on the pretext of supporting the Bangladesh liberation movement.

Unaware of Banda's statement, the RCL, under the leadership of Keerthi, prepared a statement that went directly against Banda's capitulation to the Indian national bourgeoisie.

"The task of the proletariat is not that of supporting any one of the warring factions of the bourgeoisie, but that of utilising each and every conflict in the camp of the class enemy for the seizure of power with the perspective of setting up a federated socialist republic, which alone would be able to satisfy the social and national aspirations of the millions of toilers in the subcontinent," the RCL stated.

Once he learned of the ICFI statement, Keerthi wrote immediately to

ICFI secretary Cliff Slaughter expressing the RCL's firm opposition. "It is not possible to support the national liberation struggle of the Bengali people and the voluntary unification of India on socialist foundations without opposing the Indo-Pakistan war," he declared.

At the same time, Keerthi took a principled internationalist position, withdrawing the RCL statement and calling for discussion within the international party on the RCL's differences with the ICFI statement. Although "it is difficult to defend the IC statement," he wrote, "clarity inside the international is more important than anything else, for it is impossible for us to build a national section without fighting to build the international."

The SLL leadership deliberately blocked a discussion within the ICFI, concealing the RCL's letter from other sections. The correspondence became known only after the 1985–86 split of the ICFI with the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), the successor to the British SLL.

The SLL's capitulation to the Indian bourgeoisie was one of the initial expressions of its drift away from Trotskyism and abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution, despite the leading role it played in the struggle against Pabloism in early 1960s. The SLL leadership responded to Keerthi's opposition by working to isolate the RCL within the ICFI, and exerted immense pressure to shift it from its proletarian internationalist axis.

Despite all the political difficulties arising from the SLL's unprincipled actions, as well as severe state repression, the RCL, under Keerthi's leadership, continued a courageous fight to unify the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—on the fight for socialist internationalism, in opposition to the communal politics of all sections of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

The RCL intransigently defended the democratic rights of the oppressed Tamil minority against the systematic anti-Tamil discrimination and violence of successive Colombo governments, which culminated in brutal pogroms in July 1983 and plunged the island into civil war. From the very outset, the RCL demanded the immediate withdrawal of Sri Lankan troops from the predominately Tamil north and east of the island. The party consistently fought to unite the working class, opposing all forms of nationalism and communalism.

The high point of Keerthi's uncompromising commitment to Trotskyism was in the ICFI's split with the opportunist leadership of WRP in 1985–86. Keerthi immediately expressed his agreement with documents drafted by David North, previously suppressed by the WRP leadership, criticising the WRP's abandonment of the Theory of Permanent Revolution and its opportunist embrace of bourgeois nationalist leaderships in the Middle East and "left" Labour and union officials in Britain.

The split with the WRP opportunists led to a very close and principled collaboration within the ICFI that paved the way for a renaissance of Marxism within the international Trotskyist movement. Keerthi, in particular, worked closely with David North in making a detailed analysis of the WRP's protracted political degeneration, demonstrating that opportunist politics stemmed from its abandonment of Trotskyism. Keerthi was reinvigorated, describing the period after the split as one of the happiest and most fruitful of his political career.

In July 1987, Sri Lankan President J.R. Jayawardena, confronting a deep crisis as a result of the war against the LTTE, signed the Indo-Lanka Accord with Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Under the Accord, Indian "peacekeepers" were dispatched to the north and east of the island to suppress opposition and to disarm the Tamil separatist groups. At the same time, released from the war in the north and east, Sri Lankan troops were redeployed in the south to ruthlessly suppress opposition among workers and rural youth.

The RCL was the only party to oppose the Accord on the basis of working class internationalism. It politically fought against the false

claims of the LSSP, Stalinist Communist Party and Pabloite Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) that the Accord would bring peace to the island and solve the festering national question. It also opposed the Sinhala chauvinist campaign launched by the SLFP and JVP which denounced the Accord for splitting the nation.

In November 1987, Keerthi worked with David North in drafting a comprehensive statement of the ICFI entitled, "The Situation in Sri Lanka and the Political Tasks of the Revolutionary Communist League." It explained that the Indo-Lanka Accord had "demonstrated the perfidious and reactionary character of the national bourgeoisie in the backward countries" and revealed the political bankruptcy of petty-bourgeois nationalism in the capitulation by the LTTE before the Indian bourgeoisie.

The statement, firmly based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution, established that the democratic rights of Tamils in Sri Lanka could only be realised through a struggle to unify the working class on the program and perspective of international socialism in opposition to both Sinhala and Tamil communalism. It raised, for the first time, the call for the United Socialist States of Sri Lanka and Eelam.

We have now entered a new period in which the Trotskyist principles that comrade Keerthi fought firmly to defend have been fully vindicated. As David North explained in his opening report to the SEP-US Summer School in July 2019, the ICFI "has begun the fifth stage of the history of the Trotskyist movement," in which "we are now witnessing the intersection of a new revolutionary upsurge of the international working class with the political activity of the International Committee."

As Trotsky had warned, the betrayals of the international working class by the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy culminated in December 1991 in its dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism. Similarly, the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed one after another in 1989. The Maoist regime in China, which initiated capitalist restoration much earlier, in 1978, has transformed China into a major centre of cheap labour for global capital.

All those political forces that once dominated the working class and oppressed masses and against which Keerthi fought intransigently—the Stalinists, Maoists, bourgeois nationalists and anti-Trotskyist LSSP—have been discredited in the eyes of masses. As the ICFI alone explained, the development of globalised production has fatally undermined the nationalist programs on which all these organisations were based and exposed their pro-imperialist character.

Workers throughout the world are coming into struggle against the onslaught on their basic social and democratic rights as the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine intensifies the global crisis of capitalism. This has been exemplified by the months-long popular uprising in Sri Lanka under conditions of soaring inflation that began in April and led to the collapse of the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

The working class and rural masses are now entering new struggles against Rajapakse's replacement, Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is implementing the harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Drawing on the political lessons of the struggles waged by comrade Keerthi, and in collaboration with the ICFI, the SEP has waged a relentless campaign against all those trade unions and pseudo-left organisations that have sought to tie workers to the so-called opposition capitalist parties. All of them openly support the IMF's austerity agenda and stand diametrically opposed to the interests of working people.

The SEP has not only exposed bourgeois opposition parties and their call for an "interim government," but advanced a political alternative for workers and rural toilers to fight for their class interests. The party has launched a campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on action committees independent of the unions

and all capitalist parties. The SEP has called on working people to form such committees in every factory, work place, plantation and neighborhood and in rural areas across the island.

The Congress is to spearhead the independent mobilisation of workers and rural toilers in the fight to establish a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies, as a part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

In its July 20 statement initiating the campaign for the Congress, the SEP explained: “Only the working class, rallying the masses behind it in struggle against the entire social and political order, can secure democratic rights, put an end to entrenched discrimination against Tamils and other ethnic minorities, and resolve the pressing issues confronting poor farmers and rural workers, including the lack of land, the staggering cost of fertiliser and other critical supplies, and relentless pressure exerted by large agricultural concerns on small producers.”

Comrade Keerthi waged an intransigent struggle for Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated that the capitalist class is utterly incapable of meeting the aspirations of working people. The working class alone is able to rally the rural poor in the political fight for basic democratic and social rights, as part of the struggle for socialism internationally. The lessons of those struggles have broad significance for workers and youth internationally, nowhere more so than in South Asia.

In his principled opposition to Indian military intervention in East Pakistan in 1971, Keerthi pointed to the reactionary role of the Indian national bourgeoisie, despite its anti-imperialist and democratic pretences. Today, the political establishment in New Delhi is nakedly lining up with the US war drive against China, even as it launches major attacks on the social position of workers and rural toilers, completely confirming Keerthi’s analysis.

The necessary conclusions now need to be drawn. To fight against the growing danger of world war and to defend basic social and democratic rights, it is necessary to turn to the only force able to resolve these great historic problems—the working class. Workers and youth in South Asia, along with their class brothers and sisters, need to turn to the ICFI and join its campaign to build an international anti-war movement based on socialist policies.

The legacy of comrade Keerthi’s dedicated struggle over two decades for the Trotskyist program and perspective based on the Theory of Permanent Revolution lives on in the fight of the SEP and ICFI to build the revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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