

Sri Lankan SEP pays tribute to Keerthi Balasuriya

Our reporter
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On December 18, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka paid tribute to Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya on the 35th anniversary of his death. About 40 party members, supporters and family members participated in the event, which was held at the graveside memorial headstone for Keerthi at the Borella Public Cemetery in Colombo.

Keerthi was the first general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), predecessor to the SEP, and was a prominent leader of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), the world Trotskyist movement. He led the RCL from its inception in 1968 until his untimely death at the age of 39, in 1987.

K. Ratnayake, national editor of the *World Socialist Web Site* in Sri Lanka, chaired the event. Ratnayake, who along with Keerthi was a founding member of the RCL in June 1968, briefly reviewed the political events that led to the establishment of the RCL.

Ratnayake explained the political confusion created among workers and youth by the great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which claimed to be Trotskyist but entered into a coalition government with the capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964. He detailed the crucial role played by the ICFI in clarifying the underlying political issues in the LSSP's betrayal.

“Comrade Keerthi’s political activities were not merely confined to the RCL and Sri Lanka. He was also a prominent leader in our international movement and so his demise was a tragic loss to our international movement,” he said.

Ratnayake explained Keerthi’s dedication to the defence and development of the Trotskyist program of world socialist revolution and his commitment to fighting for the political independence of the working class.

SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekera read out a letter to the event from David North, chairperson of the

International Editorial Board of the WSWs, with simultaneous translations in Sinhala and Tamil.

Vilani Peiris, Keerthi’s lifelong companion and an SEP Political Committee member, explained that the unique character of his political work was his commitment to the internationalist perspective of Trotskyism.

Peiris referred to the political crisis created by the 1971 Indian military intervention into East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, explaining that the RCL differed with the position of the Socialist Labour League, the then-British section of the ICFI.

“The RCL statement written by Comrade Keerthi presented the politically correct position of opposing the war from within both India and Pakistan, but he did not make it public, regarding the clarification of the world party as foremost. Such was the principled character of Keerthi’s politics,” she said.

Peiris also explained the crucial role played by Keerthi in the 1985–86 split in the ICFI during which the orthodox Trotskyists defeated the nationalist renegades of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP, previously the SLL). The WRP had retreated from its principled opposition to Pabloism, a tendency that originally emerged inside the Fourth International early in the 1950s. Pabloism rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and concocted various anti-Trotskyist theories, claiming that Stalinism could be pushed to the left.

“While the fight for Trotskyist principles against the WRP’s abandonment of internationalism and historical materialism was begun as far back as 1982 by Comrade David North, Keerthi only learnt of this principled opposition later, during the 1985–86 split. He immediately understood its correctness,” Peiris said.

Sakuntha Hirimutugoda addressed the memorial on behalf of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). He began with a quote from American

Trotskyist, James P. Cannon, about the power of Marxist analysis: “Their authors may be killed, but ideas, once promulgated, live their own life. If they are correct ideas, they make their way through all obstacles.”

Hirimutugoda commented: “These remarks are utterly correct and relevant in relationship to Comrade Keerthi. Even though we are part of a generation that has not physically seen him, we give expression to, and fight for, his ideas through our work today.”

Hirimutugoda referred to the writings of Keerthi, including his statement on the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, and his analysis of the petty-bourgeois nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in Sri Lanka.

Keerthi lived a short life of 39 years and a 35-year period has elapsed since his death, the speaker continued. “What has happened to the parties and organisations against which Keerthi so powerfully fought?” He answered by pointing out that these organisations had become supporters of imperialist war and had nothing to offer the youth.

Keerthi’s ideas, however, were animated by the perspective of world socialist revolution required amid the growing danger of a third nuclear war and the rising tide of working class struggles internationally, Hirimutugoda said.

SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekera, the final speaker, stated: “The basic foundation and axis of comrade Keerthi’s political life was internationalism, Trotskyism and Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution, and his commitment to the struggle to build the international revolutionary party of the working class.”

These basic principles, the speaker continued, “are immensely important for the current generation of workers and youth now entering into revolutionary struggles globally against the ruling class onslaught on their basic social and democratic rights.”

Jayasekera referred to Keerthi’s detailed analysis of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which had launched an adventurist rebellion of Sinhala peasant and student youth against the then-SLFP-CP-LSSP coalition government. His analysis established the RCL’s working class internationalist position against the JVP’s petty-bourgeois nationalism.

Under Keerthi’s leadership, the RCL, despite its well known political differences with the JVP, launched a powerful campaign within the working class to defend rural youth against the government’s bloody repression of

the JVP rebellion.

“Keerthi based himself on the theory of Permanent Revolution: The basic democratic rights of the oppressed rural masses, the right to defend their lives against the repression of the bourgeois government, can and should be defended only by the working class, which carries out that task as a part of its struggle for socialism,” Jayasekera said.

Keerthi’s drafting of the RCL statement opposing both the Indian and Pakistani bourgeois governments in the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971 and the Indian army invasion of then-East Pakistan was based on the same principles of the theory of Permanent Revolution, the speaker added.

“The bourgeois ruling classes in backward countries are incapable of defending democratic rights, but work to trample them. The defence of those democratic rights is a task of the working class.

“This is why Keerthi insisted in the RCL statement that ‘a federated socialist republic [in the Indian subcontinent]... alone would be able to satisfy the social and national aspirations of the millions of toilers in the subcontinent’ and that the working class must take the initiative in that fight,” Jayasekera said.

Referring to the SEP’s campaign to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, Jayasekera said this fight was based on the theory of Permanent Revolution defended by Keerthi.

“We have characterised our congress as a Democratic and Socialist Congress because the democratic and socialist tasks in backward countries like Sri Lanka are inseparably connected. The democratic tasks will be carried out by the working class, rallying the oppressed masses, including the rural poor, as a part of its struggle for socialism,” he said.

Jayasekera concluded his remarks by telling those in attendance that the best way to commemorate Keerthi’s political life was to fully commit themselves to the struggle to build the SEP and the ICFI in the coming period.



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