

Hundreds attend funeral of Sri Lankan Trotskyist Sarath Kumara

Our reporters
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On Monday nearly 500 people, including family members and other relatives, as well as friends, neighbours and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters attended the funeral of long-time SEP member Sarath Kumara. The ceremony was held at his home in Horagoda village, in southern Sri Lanka, about 170 kilometres from Colombo.

According to Sarath's will and on the request of his widow Nilmini, the funeral was organised by the SEP. The non-religious ceremony, which was conducted in line with Trotskyist traditions, was a unique experience for residents of the remote village.

Thousands visited Sarath's home to pay their last respects to the Trotskyist fighter who died at a hospital near Al Jubar Industrial Zone in Saudi Arabia on December 21, after a brief illness. His body was kept at his home for four days, after it was returned to Sri Lanka on Friday.

Sarath joined the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, in 1991 while employed at the Kamkaru Sevana (Shelter for Workers) factory, a non-government organisation in Ratmalana on the outskirts of Colombo. He remained a courageous and dedicated working-class fighter for the perspective of socialist internationalism until his death at the age of 57.

Sarath's wife and two sons live in a Bhagyagama scheme home in Horagoda, about 17 kilometres from Matara, a major town in Sri Lanka's southern province. Horagoda, an agricultural area, previously depended on paddy, rubber, cinnamon and tea cultivation.

The regressive policies of successive Sri Lankan governments towards the peasantry forced younger generations to move away from agriculture. Today, many residents are employed as masons, carpenters and other craftsmen, with others working in government jobs, including teaching.

Many workers and poor from Horagoda village joined their counterparts from around the island in the four-month popular uprising beginning last April against the former Rajapakse government. There are only two or three bus

services per day to Matara from Horagoda with the closest at Akurassa District Hospital, 12 kilometres away, or at Matara Base Hospital.

SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members attended the funeral home on the weekend and Monday. They distributed copies of Sarath's obituary published on the *World Socialist Web Site* to the hundreds of people who came to pay their last respects. Many spoke about Sarath with tears in their eyes.

Sugath Kumara, Sarath's nearest neighbour, said: "He came from Moratuwa [on the outskirts of Colombo], settled here and won the hearts of everyone in the village in a very short time. He was a very friendly person with the highest humane qualities. We know that he was involved in Trotskyist politics. Our village is part of Akuressa parliamentary electorate, which was represented by Dr S. A. Wickremasinghe, the founding leader of the [Stalinist] Communist Party (CP).

"Sarath explained the difference between his party and Dr. Wickremasinghe's party. We didn't understand everything he said but one thing was clear, he said the SEP will never support capitalist parties. He told us that all the problems we face are the consequences of the betrayal of the CP and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party who joined a coalition with capitalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party of Madam Bandaranayake in 1964," he said.

Another neighbour explained that Sarath was a very selfless individual: "If someone was in financial trouble, Sarath was the one who helped. Sometimes he gave money by pawning his gold necklace and when he came from abroad, he always came with gifts for the children in the neighbourhood. Sarath was a library that brought knowledge to us and an entertainer with full musical skills, including playing keyboards and the tabla. We wondered how he had this much knowledge and humanity but when we read the obituary of Sarath, we realised that his qualities and knowledge came from the party."

The funeral was broadcast live on the SEP Facebook page and has so far been watched by over 1,500 people. Many people, including members of the SEP, have commented on the ceremony, adding messages of condolence and revolutionary salutes.

SEP political member Pani Wijesiriwardena chaired the meeting, reminding those in attendance about Sarath's revolutionary qualities as a Trotskyist fighter. "After joining the party, he unwaveringly fought for perspectives of world socialist revolution until his death," Wijesiriwardena said.

"Among neighbours he was a popular and intelligent worker, and a kind helper. Where did he obtain these humane qualities? It was because he was member of the RCL/SEP from a young age and fought to defend workers' rights in his workplace and in other regions. He was a member of movement that fights for the emancipation of the working class and oppressed masses," Wijesiriwardena said.

SEP assistant secretary Saman Gunadasa said that Sarath—contrary to those talking about "system change" but promoting its reform—devoted his life to the struggle for the overthrow of the capitalist system. The speaker reminded the audience how Sarath, along with his friend and RCL/SEP member Chrisantha Jayasinghe, fought for the rights of their fellow workers against the bosses and the trade union bureaucracies while working at the Kamkaru Sevana factory and the Elastomeric Tools and Dies company.

Gunadasa said the world today needed many more Saraths to fight for the mobilisation of the working class to overthrow capitalism, concluding: "Sarath has left us, but we will continue his fight through political lessons of his life."

SEP member Chrisantha Jayasinghe addressed the event, recalling when he first met Sarath in 1987 at Kamkaru Sevana. "While working closely with him I witnessed his determination to fight for the emancipation of the working class and that this was deep within his soul. That brought us closer," Jayasinghe said.

Referring to political witch hunt launched against them by the Kamkaru Sevana administration because of their political work as RCL members, Jayasinghe said: "He [Sarath] fought against those attacks as a giant. He never changed his position."

Speaking on behalf of the IYSSE, Sakuntha Hirimutugoda said: "Many people say workers can't play a critical role in politics, but the life of comrade Sarath Kumara demonstrated the ability of the working class to rise up to higher levels when they fight for revolutionary politics."

The revolutionary life of Sarath, Hirimutugoda said, provides essential lessons to young people about how to fight for their rights and urged those in the audience to study his life-long struggle and join the SEP/IYSSE.

SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekara, the final speaker, said that while Sarath's wife and two sons had lost a loving husband and a loving father, "We, the SEP have lost a dedicated revolutionary fighter."

Jayasekera explained that Sarath joined the party when it was in a struggle to unite workers across Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim lines against the United National Party government's anti-Tamil communalist war and the separatist program of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The RCL, he said, was also fighting to mobilise the working class against the government's bloody state repression of rural youth in the south.

"Comrade Sarath was attracted to the RCL because of the principled fight of our movement," Jayasekera said. "When he was fighting against the witch-hunts unleashed by the bosses he believed in the strength of workers as a class, not only in Sri Lanka but worldwide.

"The period we have now entered powerfully vindicates the revolutionary socialist principles for which Sarath fought," Jayasekera said. He urged those present to study the SEP's program and perspective and join the party as the best tribute to Sarath.

M. Jayasekera addressed the gathering on behalf of Sarath's relatives. He said that the gathering presented a "different culture." It was the first time that local villagers had witnessed a funeral without religious customs and in line with the traditions of Sarath's political party. The tribute to Sarath by his co-fighters, he said, provided villagers with important political lessons.

Chairman Wijesiriwardena concluded the meeting by thanking Sarath's widow Nilmini, her two sons, and all the other relatives and villagers for their assistance in holding the funeral in the tradition of the Trotskyist movement.

After the meeting, Sarath's coffin was carried by SEP members to a grave in the garden of his home and buried with the assistance of relatives and villagers while the Internationale was played through the public address system.



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