

Sri Lankan SEP pays tribute to lifelong Trotskyist Jerani Ratnayake

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a memorial meeting to pay tribute to lifelong party member Jerani Ratnayake on July 8, the first anniversary of her death. Jerani died on July 8 last year at the age of 73 years of a heart attack induced by the complications of a COVID-19 infection.

SEP members and supporters, Jerani's co-workers from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka and her family members, including her two children and four grandchildren, attended the event. Before the meeting started, SEP leaders laid floral tributes at her monument in the Boralesgamuwa Cemetery.

K. Ratnayake, the national WSWWS editor in Sri Lanka and Jerani's husband and lifelong partner, chairing the meeting, said: "Her death is a great loss not only to our family, but also to our party. She has been a great support to my political life."

Ratnayake explained the turbulent political developments in which Jerani joined the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP's predecessor, in 1974 and which have continued to the present reemergence of global class struggle. This has included the island's protracted civil war from 1983 to 2009 and the massacre of tens of thousands of rural youth in the late 1980s.

"Jerani was very keen about the ICFI's intervention into the developing political situation. Although her bad health prevented her from actively campaigning among workers and youth during her last decade, she did not miss any public meeting or picket organised by the party. She welcomed the reemergence of the class struggle including last year's mass movement in Sri Lanka."

Addressing the gathering, K.B. Mavikumbura, a long standing SEP member and one of Jerani's Central Bank co-workers, recalled her determined fight against pro-

capitalist trade union leaders and for the revolutionary socialist perspective and program of the SEP.

In the early 1980s, a few years after Mavikumbura joined the Central Bank, the chairman and secretary of the Central Bank Employees Union (CEBU) had been suspended. The workers organised a protest march against this suspension. The management responded by expanding the witch-hunt and suspending more workers, including Mavikumbura, for their involvement in the protest.

In a CEBU meeting to discuss the management's witch-hunt, the union leadership, controlled by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Nava Sama Samaja Party, proposed to apologise to the management to secure the reinstatement of suspended workers. The RCL faction brought another motion opposing this shameless capitulation to the management. It called for the mobilization of the working class against the victimisations and the United National Party government's attack on social and democratic rights.

Recalling Jerani's remarks at the meeting, Mavikumbura said: "Sinhala was not her mother language, yet she impressively articulated the motion in a convincing manner in Sinhala, despite some differences in the pronunciation. Her intervention made a huge impact on me, as I had not been much educated about Marxist principles. I voted for that motion, which was defeated, and I decided to join the RCL."

M. Thevarajah, an SEP Political Committee member, who is from Jaffna, the same hometown as Jerani, addressed the gathering in Tamil. He observed that she had been an inspiration to him as she fought against the Tamil separatist organisations that emerged as a consequence of the LSSP's great betrayal and for the unity of the working class under the program of world

socialist revolution. The LSSP, which claimed to be Trotskyist, joined the bourgeois coalition government of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964.

Thevarajah recalled one incident. “The RCL held two public meetings in Jaffna opposing the Indo-Lanka accord in 1987, which was accepted by separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), including its own disarming. Jerani translated Ratnayake’s speeches into Tamil in these meetings. These events made a deep impression on the social consciousness in the North and was how the party was able to develop a strong presence in Jaffna.” The RCL was the only party which opposed the Indo-Lanka accord on the basis of uniting Sinhala and Tamil workers on an international socialist perspective against both Sinhala chauvinism and Tamil nationalism.

Vilani Peiris, an SEP Political Committee member, noted Jerani’s contribution in developing the party’s political work among the Tamil-speaking workers and the oppressed. She translated important party documents and articles for the *Tholilalar Pathai*, the party’s Tamil language paper, and later for the WSWS as well as speeches at public meetings.

Peiris spoke about Jerani during the anti-Tamil pogroms in July 1983 that marked the beginning of the island’s civil war. “The RCL’s office was located in Wellawatte [a predominantly Tamil inner suburb of Colombo], and Sinhala racist thugs came there also. At that time Jerani and Theva [Thevarajah], our Tamil comrades, were inside the office. Comrade Wije [former party general secretary] heroically escorted them on a motorbike to safety through the burning of houses and dead bodies of Tamils who were victimised.

“During these racist attacks, Jerani’s house in Ratmalana was also burnt down. Despite this shocking and life-threatening experience she was firm in her understanding that these racial riots were the machinations of decaying capitalism to prop up its class rule and the only way to counter them was to fight for the revolutionary unity of the working class to overthrow the capitalist system.”

Addressing the meeting, SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekara said: “The most important decision Jerani made in her life was to join the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI and that very decision reflects what she really was.

“As a Tamil she had faced state-sponsored racial

violence. Her father, who had been working in Colombo, had to flee to Jaffna with the whole family during 1958 racial riots when she was a nine-year-old girl. That happened in the aftermath of the SLFP-led government making Sinhala the only state language. The LSSP-CP-SLFP coalition government, which came to power in 1970, made Buddhism the state religion, further intensifying anti-Tamil racial discrimination.”

Jayasekera said: “As a response to this racial discrimination, petty bourgeois movements emerged among Tamil youths on the perspective that Tamils must organise separately to find a solution. This was enabled due to political disorientation created by the betrayal of the LSSP in joining a capitalist government in 1964.”

He explained: “Jerani understood that the only way to fight anti-Tamil racial discrimination and also other ruling class attacks on social and democratic rights was to fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government as part of the world socialist revolution. With these strong convictions she dedicated her life, over the span of five decades, to fight to build the revolutionary movement.”

Jayasekera pointed out that Jerani was able to witness the mass uprising last year against the Rajapakse government in Sri Lanka. It was part of a global upsurge of the working class, powerfully vindicating ICFI’s characterisation of this decade as “the decade of the socialist revolution”.

“She died as a victim of the government’s let it rip COVID-19 policy, amid the mass movement in Sri Lanka, at a moment when her service was much needed,” he added.

Jayasekera concluded by inviting all who appreciate her life to take up this political struggle to which she dedicated her life by joining the SEP as the best possible way to pay tribute to her memory.



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