

Sri Lankan workers and youth discuss Wije Dias' decades-long struggle for Trotskyist principles

Our correspondents
9 August 2023

On Saturday July 29, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a moving and well-attended meeting marking a year since the passing of Wije Dias, the former general secretary of the SEP. Several workers and youth attending the event spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about Wije's historic role in the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.

A young person from Hatton, a central plantation district, said: "I've known Comrade Wije since my childhood. In those days, he participated in party meetings in the estates with my father, an SEP member. I've decided to attend today's meeting out of respect for Comrade Wije.

"Wije fought to defend the rights of the workers, explaining that Tamil workers could not win their rights through the Tamil capitalist parties and the trade unions. He also emphasised that the workers had to unite globally. His perspective was international socialism.

"Although the Tamil parties and the trade unions claim that they can defend the rights of estate workers, I don't have any faith in these outfits. My estate worker friends also criticise them.

"I'm unable to get any work at the estate and so I work as a temporary driver in Hatton town. Although my working day is from 7 in the morning until 7 at night, I only receive a daily salary of less than 2,000 rupees [\$US6]. This is the same salary I got five years ago but today the price of goods has skyrocketed and all our hardships have amalgamated.

"Under these conditions, the future importance of

Comrade Wije's political clarifications have become clear. The best way to honour Comrade Wije is to take forward his struggle."

Suthan Muruganathan, an unemployed 22-year-old from Jaffna, said: "I was fortunate enough to know Comrade Wije since my childhood because my father was an SEP member. The first time I saw Wije was at a public meeting in Jaffna. I think it was in 2010, just after the bloody conclusion of the civil war [against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)].

"The SEP had taken a revolutionary anti-war position, opposing the anti-Tamil war of successive Colombo governments and also the separatism of Tamil nationalist militant movements, including the LTTE. My father had told me that our party comrades could survive amid all the violence from other political groups, and the state, because our party represented the interests of the working class and was based on the international working class. I think this was the same reason for Wije's charisma.

"From a young age until his death, Wije's political struggle was for Trotskyism. This was sharply expressed in the party's call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses during the concluding days of last year's mass movement. This contains important lessons for today's young generation and inspires comrades like us. Comrade Wije's death is a great loss to our party and to the international working class," Muruganathan said.

Anita, 22, a young housewife from Jaffna, said: "Even though I did not see him [Wije] when he was alive, I got the chance to understand his living ideas through the *World Socialist Web Site* and as a party member fighting for Trotskyism. From the age of 20

until his death at 80, he was a great contributor in the struggle to prepare the working class for socialist revolution. His passing is a loss not only for his close relatives but to the whole working class.”

Murali, 25, a fisherman from Jaffna, said: “I first saw Wije when he addressed a public meeting organised by the SEP at Weerasingham Hall in Jaffna, after the end of the civil war. Despite all the difficulties associated with his old age, he travelled to the war-torn north of Sri Lanka to fight for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers. He denounced all the Colombo government for the destruction created by war, explained the pro-capitalist positions of the other parties, and told us that the oppressed had to fight for a workers and peasants government.”

Thilakana Gamage, a farmer from Tangalle in the island’s south and a long-standing member of the SEP/RCL (Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of the SEP), recalled his experiences with Wije in 1980:

“I still remember my participation in an education class on revolutionary theory and practice held at the RCL headquarters in Colombo in early 1980. Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya [then RCL general secretary] delivered the main report and during a brief interval Comrade Wije, who was also attending, spoke with us. After discussing the role of various other political parties, he explained the importance of *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, the book on which the discussion was based and invited us to seriously study it.

“I also remember Comrade Wije’s participation in a meeting at my farm on the party’s political work after the July 1980 general strike. Party members and supporters from the area attended the meeting, which was held at night in my small home.

“Despite the difficulties, Wije spoke for hours explaining the political issues. He pointed out that the then government of President J.R. Jayawardena sacked about 100,000 workers in order to break the strike as part of his moves to suppress rights of the working class, establish an executive presidency, and bring foreign capital into the country.

“Wije explained that the Lanka Sama Samaja Party’s [LSSP] entrance into a bourgeois coalition in 1964, and its betrayal of the principles of the political independence of the working class, paved the way for

this situation. He pointed out the importance of establishing the RCL as the independent political leadership of the working class and for all to join that struggle.

“I also had the opportunity to attend an RCL May Day Rally during that period. Wije, who addressed the rally, explained the political roots of the LSSP’s betrayal in a clear and simple way. He pointed out that LSSP had taken this path of betrayal by following the opportunist politics of Pabloism, which repudiated the program of the Fourth International. His explanation of the political treachery of those who later split off from the LSSP, such as Bala Tampoe, Edmand Samarakkody and [Nava Sama Samaja Party leader] Vickramabahu Karunaratna, was very striking.

“Contrary to the path taken by leaders of the Fourth International, such as Pablo, and then Healy, Slaughter and Mike Banda who later betrayed, comrades Keerthi Balasuriya and Wije dedicated their whole lives, right up until their deaths, to the defence of Trotskyist principles and the training of a cadre on that basis.

“While the death of such comrades, amid a decisive political crisis in bourgeois rule, is a great loss, I strongly believe that their struggle will continue due to the existence of a cadre trained on their principles.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact