

Sri Lankan SEP celebrates comrade R.M. Gunathilake's 85th birthday

Our reporters

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka celebrated the 85th birthday of Comrade R.M. Gunathilake on Monday with the participation of about 60 family members, party members and supporters. He is the SEP's oldest member, with an implacable history of fighting for Trotskyism.

The gathering was organised as an online event. Comrade Gunathilake, his wife Hemawathi Ratnayake, two daughters and son and seven grandchildren joined from his home at Hali-Ela, near Badulla. The members and supporters of the SEP's Bandarawela branch took the initiative to organise the gathering.

Gunathilake joined the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the predecessor of the SEP, just weeks after it was formed in June 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). He was an employee of the state-owned Ceylon Transport Board (CTB).

Chairing the gathering, SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekera said that since Gunathilake joined the RCL, he fought steadfastly for the international socialist perspective and program of the RCL/SEP for more than fifty years.

“The basic essence of his revolutionary life of more than five decades has been his firm dedication to those principles of Trotskyism and his consistent struggle for that perspective.”

Jayasekera said that Gunathilake had not wavered one iota from his struggle for revolutionary principles among the working class and oppressed masses, despite immense difficulties confronting him, including state witch-hunts, the thuggery of goons and the treachery of trade union bureaucracies. “That is the example we must draw from his life,” he said.

Recalling his own experiences closely working with Gunathilake in the party's political work in the Bandarawela and Badulla areas, Jayasekera said: “During meetings of the party branch, Gunathilake would make sharp, well-focused comments to counter any deviation expressed by any member. Such remarks were not driven by any subjective motivation but aimed to politically explain and convince

relevant comrades.”

Jayasekera commended Gunathilake's earlier contributions to the party's Sinhala and Tamil papers, and later the *World Socialist Web Site*, on the social and political issues confronting plantation workers and rural poor in Uva province where he lives.

K. Ratnayake, WSWs national editor in Sri Lanka, explained Gunathilake's struggle as a leading Trotskyist cadre of the party and traced his political history.

Gunathilake grew up at Hali-Ela, an area surrounded by tea plantations where militant workers' struggles occurred. The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), and its transformation into the Trotskyist Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India in 1942, had strong support bases among Indian and Sri Lankan workers, including in the plantations.

Gunathilake was attracted to the LSSP. He joined the Ceylon Transport Board in August 1965, one year after the LSSP's historical betrayal when it joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led (SLFP) government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. There was a heated debate among workers about the LSSP joining a capitalist government.

Gunathilake took the side of those who opposed it and faced threats by LSSP trade union bureaucrats. However, he could only find a political means for voicing his opposition to the LSSP betrayal when he met RCL comrades selling *Kamkaru Puwath* (*Workers News*) outside the Maharagama CTB Depot, Ratnayake said.

“In an intense discussion, RCL comrades explained the roots of betrayal—how the opportunist Pabloite tendency abandoned Trotskyism and abetted the betrayal of the LSSP. The ICFI was established in 1953 to struggle against this revisionist tendency. The late Keerthi Balasuriya, founding general secretary of the RCL, and Wije Dias, who succeeded him, led this struggle in this region.

“In just weeks, Gunathilake decided to join the RCL. This theoretical foundation shaped Gunathilake's future struggle for the party's perspective.

“As in other sections of the working class, the RCL was

able to win a strong base among CTB workers in the struggle against the second coalition government in the 1970s. Its demand that the ‘LSSP and CP (Stalinist Communist Party) break with the coalition government and form a workers’ and peasants’ government’ greatly helped in educating workers by exposing these opportunist parties and it won over best sections to the party.

“During this struggle, Gunathilake faced threats by trade union bureaucrats and expulsion from the union, state persecution, including police arrest, suspension from work and transfer from one depot to another. His revolutionary will, however, could not be broken,” Ratnayake explained.

The United National Party (UNP) government of President J. R. Jayawardene came to power in 1977 as a result of the betrayals of the LSSP and CP. It began implementing open market economic policies, dismantling welfare programs and state institutions.

Jayawardene ruthlessly suppressed workers’ resistance, assisted by treachery of the LSSP, CP and centrist Nava Sama Samaja Party and the trade union leaderships. In July 1980, a general strike in the public sector was suppressed by sacking around 100,000 employees.

Gunathilake lost his job and had to return to his hometown. Facing enormous economic difficulties, he started farming to help his family while continuing party work. He joined the Bandarawela RCL/SEP branch and helped to develop the party’s work particularly among plantation workers. He knew a little Tamil and contributed to the RCL’s work among Tamil-speaking workers.

The UNP’s anti-Tamil racist campaigns to divide the working class along ethnic lines provoked the communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) which ended in May 2009 defeating the LTTE.

The RCL/SEP was the only party that consistently opposed the war, fighting for the democratic rights of Tamil minority and raised the demand for a Sri Lanka Eelam Socialist Republic based on an international socialist perspective.

Ratnayake said, this political struggle was particularly difficult in rural areas, but Gunathilake took the initiative in his area.

“I must say something about his response to 1985–1986 split of the ICFI from the renegades of the British Workers Revolutionary Party. He was keen to understand how the WRP degenerated and to assimilate its political lessons in order to develop the party’s struggle,” the speaker said.

Ratnayake said Gunathilake faced many ailments associated with his age but is still keenly in touch with the party’s work. “His life is the life of a revolutionary Trotskyist and it contains many lessons for us,” he concluded.

Other comrades, including Rohantha de Silva, M.

Thevarajah, Vilani Peris, Sakuntha Hirimuthugoda, Panini Wijesiriwardena, R.M. Dayananda and Saman Gunadasa briefly contributed by pointing out different aspects of Gunathilake’s political life.

Gunathilake thanked those who organised the celebration and expressed the appreciation of his role as a party cadre. “I want to tell you that I was able to play my small part in the party because it politically and theoretically educated me. As we know, the working class cannot take power into its hands without Marxist theory and the revolutionary party,” he said.

“Only through the intervention of the party to change the consciousness of working class can it be organised and armed to take power. It was what happened in Russia in 1917 under the Bolshevik Party led by Lenin and Trotsky. The Russian revolution was guided by an internationalist perspective.

“I was lucky to meet the RCL comrades. At that time, I had an idea—I guess that flowed from my farming background—that the peasantry could provide the leadership to the revolution. I was corrected by comrade Keerthi Balasuriya, who explained the critical lessons of the Russian Revolution.

“He also educated me in Leon Trotsky’s theory of Permanent Revolution which emphasised the leading revolutionary role of the working class. Other comrades, including Wije, Ratnayake and Wicks, have greatly helped me develop theoretically and politically.

“As comrades in their contributions highlighted, we are passing through the decade of socialist revolution,” he said.

Gunathilake stressed the importance of the WSWS in educating workers, youth and providing socialist perspective and added, “I advise young people: please study Marxist theory; past struggles that the party has carried out; and the critical lessons of the 20th century. In this, it is critical to study two books: *The Unfinished Twentieth Century* by David North and the two volumes of *Why Study the Russian Revolution*.



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