

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) celebrates 80th birthday of veteran Trotskyist K. Ratnayake

Our reporters

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On November 14, members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), celebrated the 80th birthday of comrade K. Ratnayake, which fell on that day, at his house in Piliyandala in the outer suburbs of Colombo.

Ratnayake has dedicated his entire adult life, encompassing some six decades, to the fight for the socialist emancipation of the working class and the oppressed masses. Despite his advanced years and health issues, he continues to play a central role in the political work of the SEP.

Ratnayake was a founding member of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the predecessor of the SEP, in 1968, having become politically active as a student at Peradeniya University. He was the secretary of its youth wing, the Revolutionary Communist Youth, from 1968 to 1971.

In 1972, Ratnayake became editor of the RCL organ *Kamkaru Mawatha* (Workers' Path) and its Tamil version *Tholilalar Pathai*, continuing in that role for decades. When the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) was established in 1998, he was elected as the WSWS national editor of the SEP (Sri Lanka), a position he still holds—a remarkable achievement.

Ratnayake closely collaborated with legendary Trotskyist leaders Keerthi Balasuriya, founding General Secretary of the RCL until his death in 1987, and Wije Dias, who was then elected as General Secretary and led the SEP until his death in 2022. Despite his difficult health conditions, Nanda Wickremesinghe, another leading founding member of the RCL/SEP, visited Ratnayake's house to personally wish him a happy birthday.

Ratnayake was also a prominent leader in the Central Bank Employees Union. Together with his beloved wife, Jerani, and other comrades he carried out a principled struggle for international socialism in the union. He and Jerani were among dozens of employees sacked from the Central Bank along with 100,000 public sector workers as the government of President J.R. Jayawardene cracked down on a general strike in 1980.

Amid the horrific anti-Tamil pogroms in July 1983 instigated by the Jayawardene government, Ratnayake's house was burnt down by racist thugs. Last year, tragically, Ratnayake lost his wife and companion Jerani who was a life-long SEP member.

A number of SEP comrades, including General Secretary Deepal Jayasekera, attended Ratnayake's birthday celebrations. In their

remarks, they pointed to, not only Ratnayake's immense contribution to Trotskyism but also the determination, courage and other great personal qualities evident in his life work.

Greetings from a number of comrades representing IC sections around the world were read out, including from David North, chairman of the International Editorial Board of the WSWS and the SEP (US). (North's greetings can be read in full here).

SEP (Sri Lanka) general secretary Jayasekera began by thanking Ratnayake's daughter and son, Vanaja and Jayan, for organising the celebration. Jayasekera recalled his first encounter with Ratnayake was through the pages of *Kamkaru Mawatha* in 1987. "I had the privilege of closely working with him under his guidance since I was called to Colombo to join the editorial staff in 1990," he said.

Maweekubura Kiribanda, Nanda Wickremesinghe, Sakuntha Hirimuthugoda, Saman Gunadasa, W.A. Sunil, Wilani Peiris, Pani Wijesiriwardena and Wasantha Rupasinghe also made brief remarks recalling their political experiences with Ratnayake.

Speaking at the end, Ratnayake said: "If I have made contributions to the party, as comrades have stated here, I was able to do it as part of the contributions of all party comrades."

He recalled his close collaboration with Keerthi Balasuriya, Wije Dias, Wickremesinghe and several others, in the founding of the RCL.

Ratnayake continued: "As part of the IC's struggle in defence of Trotskyism against Pabloite revisionism since 1953, our world party paid particular attention to the opportunist shift of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). The IC intervened opposing the historic betrayal of the LSSP in 1964, when it joined the bourgeois coalition government of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The IC intervened in the crises of the LSSP (R), a faction that emerged in opposition to the LSSP leadership. This faction, however, did not break from the national-opportunist politics of Pabloism which led to the 1964 betrayal.

"There was pressure on us to enter the LSSP from elements led by the veteran Pabloite V. Karalasingham. However, the IC's political intervention helped us to defeat this pressure and unite to build the party.

"Fifty-five years have passed since the formation of the Sri Lankan section of the IC. We have gone through numerous working class struggles in Sri Lanka and internationally. Our

comrades faced repression and violence unleashed by successive governments, the police and military and goons of the capitalist parties in building this party within the working class.”

Ratnayake concluded his remarks by explaining the critical stage of the global crisis today, as the imperialist powers, led by the US, are hurtling towards a new world war. He declared: “The most important development is the rise of the international class struggle. The task we have to shoulder is building the SEP as a mass party, along with its sister parties of the IC, to provide the revolutionary leadership necessary to bring the working class to power.”

In his greetings, David North noted that Ratnayake’s six decades-long political life has been “inextricably connected to the fight for Trotskyism, the defense of the International Committee, and the building of the Fourth International as the World Party of the Socialist Revolution.”

North recalled the decisive role played by Ratnayake in the founding of the RCL in 1968. Emphasizing the mammoth task of surveying his lifelong struggle for Trotskyism, North made the following remarks:

“But what must be stressed, in what can only be the briefest summing up of your decades of revolutionary activity, is that you have personified the political resilience, commitment to political program and principles, and unflinching personal courage upon which the fight for socialism depends. And to these qualities one must add, as all your comrades and co-workers in the Sri Lankan SEP, the editorial board of the WSWs, and the International Committee will attest to, an extraordinary capacity for sustained hard work.”

Chris Marsden, National Secretary of the SEP (Britain), described Ratnayake as a “patient, thoughtful comrade whose approach to politics and the development of perspective and program is of the highest order of seriousness.” He concluded, by stating: “It is thanks to comrades such as yourself that there exists in Sri Lanka a party and a cadre that can provide a revolutionary orientation and leadership to the working class, and whose experiences of advancing a perspective based on the theory of Permanent Revolution provide an essential element in the development of the ICFI on the Indian sub-continent and throughout the world.”

On behalf of the SEP (Australia), WSWs editor Peter Symonds and national secretary Cheryl Crisp wrote: “You can take satisfaction in the huge contribution that you have made to the development of the SEP in Sri Lanka and, more broadly, to the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International.”

They recalled, “Comrades from here have appreciated the hospitality shown by you and your wife, Jerani, whose death last year was a terrible loss to you and your children, Jayan and Vanaja. You are a very cultured man with broad interests and knowledge and a wry sense of humour.”

Richard Phillips, from the Australian SEP, has collaborated closely with Ratnayake in the editorial work of the WSWs. Phillips paid tribute to Ratnayake’s “extraordinary lifetime of political struggle for the socialist and internationalist perspectives of the ICFI,” which had impacted “on countless workers and

young people, winning them to Trotskyism and its revolutionary and internationalist principles.”

Christoph Vandreier from the SEP in Germany said: “In all the international discussions in which we have jointly participated, your thoughtful and incisive contributions have been essential for the development of our international perspective.”

Alex Lantier from the SEP in France said: “The powerful development you made opposing the communal war in Sri Lanka, Tamil nationalism and the Indo-Lankan Pact was central to the building of our party in France. Critical comrades who played a leading role in the founding of the Parti de l’égalité socialiste [SEP in France] were won by your, Keerthi’s and Wije’s great struggle for socialism against the WRP’s growing adaptation to Indian bourgeois nationalism, Stalinism and Pabloism.”

Nick Beams, of the SEP (Australia), wrote: “The program builds the party. That is fundamental to our analysis. But the program requires fighters for it. And in the course of your life, you have been one of the most stalwart and intransigent fighters for the program of Trotskyism.”

Keith Jones, on behalf of the Canadian section of the ICFI, noted: “You have been an implacable fighter for the political independence and hegemony of the working class and the program of world socialist revolution.” Jones added: “Your capacity for self-sacrifice is well-known. Often, too often, you have taxed yourself mentally and physically staying up all hours of the night to ensure that the WSWs is provided with a Marxist assessment of the developing class struggle in Sri Lanka and South Asia, and the working class with a revolutionary perspective and orientation.”

Gnana, assistant national secretary of the SEP in France, said in his greetings: “The LSSP’s betrayal, civil war, attacks by killers of the JVP, repeated harassment by the government and its military and intimidation by Tamil nationalists have failed to intimidate you. You have never become unstable. Very determined Trotskyist leaders, the leadership of the RCL/SEP in which you are part, have served as an example of extraordinary political strength.”



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