SEP (US) National Secretary Joseph Kishore addresses “Centenary of Trotskyism” public meeting in Colombo

Our reporters
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On Sunday afternoon, Joseph Kishore, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the US, addressed a well-attended public meeting titled “Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the 21st Century” at the New Town Hall in Colombo to commemorate the centenary of Trotskyism.

The meeting was organised by the SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka, and was preceded by another meeting on the same theme addressed by Kishore at the University of Peradeniya on December 7.

Over a hundred workers, students and housewives, including SEP members and supporters from Colombo and outstations, attended the meeting, with a strong delegation from Sri Lanka’s war-torn north.

The meeting was chaired by SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekara. His initial remarks, made in Sinhala, were translated into Tamil by SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah. Kishore’s speech, delivered in English, was translated into Sinhala by Jayasekara and its Tamil translation was made by SEP Political Committee member Shreeharan through an online link for relevant listeners in the audience.

Jayasekara began the proceedings with a warm welcome of Kishore. He explained the immense significance of the revolutionary life of Helen Halyard, a long-time member of the SEP (US) and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), who died suddenly at the age of 73 on November 28. In response to his request, the audience observed a one-minute silence to pay tribute to Halyard, who had devoted 52 years of her life to the struggle to build the world Trotskyist movement.

Kishore said that “it is a great honor to be able to address workers and youth” in Sri Lanka “and to meet with comrades who have played such a long and essential role in the history of the ICFI.” He added that Sri Lankan SEP leaders “are justly revered throughout the international socialist movement for their principled struggle for Trotskyism, often in the face of violent opposition from the ruling class.” He specially recalled the late leaders of the Sri Lankan section—Keerthi Balasuriya, who died 36 years ago and Wije Dias, who passed away on July 27, 2022.

Explaining the need for workers and youth to base their struggles on an international perspective, not a national basis, Kishore pointed to the basic Marxist principle that “it is impossible to develop an orientation in any particular country based on the national peculiarities of that country.”

Kishore outlined the ongoing genocidal war for the past two months against Palestinians in Gaza by Israel’s right-wing Netanyahu regime, which has included systematic bombing, murdering, starving, deprivation of medical care and people being driven from their homes.

Detailing how the US and its NATO allies have actively supported Israel’s war, Kishore commented: “The open support for genocidal actions can only be understood as part of the unfolding global war of the US-NATO axis, which is or will impact the population of the entire world.”

“For American imperialism, support for Israel’s actions is bound up with its striving for world hegemony. Most directly, the Biden administration has utilized Israel’s actions in Gaza as an opportunity to deploy massive military hardware to the Mediterranean, explicitly targeting Iran. A conflict with Iran is itself seen in relation to the US conflict with both Russia and China. The war on Gaza and the US-NATO war in Ukraine against Russia are in fact two fronts in a rapidly escalating world war,” he said.

Pointing out how South Asia was being pushed into the global geo-political tensions, Kishore said: “There is no part of the world that is not ensnared in this expanding conflict. In particular, South Asia and the entire Indian Ocean region, including Sri Lanka, is being dragged into the US campaign to encircle China, which is seen by the American ruling class as its principal global rival.”

The speaker explained how far-right and fascistic individuals were rising internationally, pointing to former President Donald Trump of the US Republican Party, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Javier Milei in Argentina, Narendra Modi in India and Giorgia Meloni in Italy.

Kishore insisted, however, on the importance of “the resurgence of the most basic and powerful of all social forces, the working class,” as the “most significant factor in the present situation.” He detailed the growing strike movements of workers throughout the world, including the US and Europe, and the struggles of workers in Sri Lanka against International Monetary Fund-backed austerity.

“Everywhere workers and youth are confronted with a situation that raises the necessity for revolutionary solutions, on a global

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scale," Kishore said. "This necessarily raises fundamental political and historical questions. What is socialism? What happened in the 20th century? Was there an alternative to Stalinism?"

Kishore elaborated on the 100-year struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement for the perspective and program of international socialism, starting with the founding of the Left Opposition under the leadership of Leon Trotsky in October 1923. This was followed by the establishment of the Fourth International in 1938 and the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in 1953 to fight the liquidationist Pabloite tendency that had emerged in the Fourth International.

Kishore provided a detailed account of the rich history of Trotskyism in Sri Lanka, from the formation of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1935, which "turned to Trotskyism in the late 1930s, and then in the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India, Ceylon and Burma (BLPI), formed in 1942 through a fusion of the LSSP with several organizations in India."

This history included "the BLPI's powerful intervention in the anti-imperialist movement, on the basis of a perspective for an all-India revolutionary struggle, uniting workers and oppressed masses of all languages, religions and ethnicities" and its opposition to the 1947 communal partition of British India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India, and also to the 1948 nominal independence of Sri Lanka, then known as Ceylon.

The speaker added that "in a speech in August 1948, BLPI leader Colvin R. de Silva attacked moves to disenfranchise Tamil workers, which were based on the assumption that 'the state must be coeval with the nation and the nation with the race' as 'an outmoded idea and an exploded philosophy.'" Kishore also quoted de Silva's remarks in the same speech that: "It is precisely under fascism that the nation was to be made coeval with the race, and race the governing factor in the composition of the state."

Kishore then referred to "seventy years since the Open Letter, published by American Trotskyist James P. Cannon," and the formation of the ICFI in 1953, on the basis of the most fundamental principles of Trotskyism elaborated in that document, to defend and continue the Trotskyist movement against the Pabloite revisionist tendency that had emerged in the Fourth International in the early 1950s.

Kishore explained how Pabloite revisionism openly encouraged the political degeneration of the LSSP along a nationalist line, culminating in the Great Betrayal in 1964 when the LSSP entered a bourgeois coalition of then Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike.

The speaker pointed out that the Revolutionary Communist League, the SEP's predecessor, was founded in 1968 on the basis of a struggle led by the ICFI "to draw the real lessons of the Pabloite LSSP's betrayal of the program of socialist internationalism."

After explaining that workers and youth, entering into struggles throughout the world, are "beginning to draw revolutionary conclusions," Kishore said: "The task facing workers in every country is the building of a genuine socialist movement in the working class, that will fight to take power from the criminal oligarchs and warmongers, the purveyors of genocide and their accomplices, and reorganize social and economic life, on a world scale, based on social equality. In accomplishing this task, workers and youth cannot escape history."

Kishore concluded: "The present is formed and molded by the past, and it is on the basis of the experiences of the past that we will prove up to the challenge of meeting the problems of the present and building a socialist society in the future."

In the question-and-answer session, replying to a question on the relationship between the ICFI-SEP's call for workers to form their own rank-and-file committees and its struggle to build the revolutionary party, Kishore explained that ICFI-SEP does not impose any requirements for workers to accept socialism and revolutionary politics when joining action committees. "Also, we do not obscure or downplay the significance of the political questions. We explain to workers that the struggle for their rights is a fight against the betrayals of the trade union apparatus. The development of this struggle is ultimately a fight against the ruling class and capitalist system. Also, this struggle for basic rights cannot be separated from other problems. Thus, it is tied to the struggle against imperialist war."

With reference to struggles within the rank-and-file committees, Kishore explained that it is the workers who are trained and educated, based on the ICFI's political program and clarity on political issues, that can provide the necessary political guidance for workers in these rank-and-file committees in fighting for their rights. He continued: "In these challenging tasks the party takes into account the political issues. When organisational issues are given the priority, it indicates 'organisational opportunism.' Our main focus is on the clarity of historical issues, and it can only be done on the basis of an understanding of the history of Trotskyism."

Kishore added: "The working-class political leadership must be built on these lessons, and the realisation of socialism is possible only through that. Revolutionary struggles are developing across the world, and working-class struggles are developing. Our movement is based on the understanding that the theoretical and political level of the working class must be elevated to the necessary level. Only through this method do we approach the masses."

Before closing the meeting, Jayasekara announced the publication of the Tamil translation of Trotsky's monumental work, *The Revolution Betrayed*, written in 1936, by Kamkaru Mawatha/Tholilalar Pathai Publishers, the publishing house of the Sri Lankan SEP. He especially thanked comrades of the French section of the ICFI for arranging the translation, editing and computer page-setting of the publication. He handed a copy of the book to Kishore.

On the chair's appeal for contributions to the SEP's party building fund, the audience donated over 16,000 rupees (about $US50). The meeting concluded by singing the *Internationale.*

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