

Leela Balasuriya (1946–2025): A veteran Trotskyist fighter in Sri Lanka

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The funeral of comrade Leela Balasuriya, a longstanding member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, was held on December 14, 2025, in her native village in the Dompe area, with the participation of party members and supporters, her relatives and villagers. SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekera delivered a tribute at the funeral of this worker comrade, whose life as a Trotskyist spanned nearly five decades.

Leela was born in 1946 as the second child in a family of four, with an elder sister and two younger brothers. Her parents owned a small plot of land and made their living through small-scale farming. She studied at Siyane National School in her village and, after completing her schooling, obtained a clerical job in the Department for Registration of Persons in 1972.

She joined the All-Ceylon Government Clerical Union (ACGCU), affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL), then a partner in the capitalist coalition government led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which had claimed to be Trotskyist, had already joined a coalition with the SLFP in 1964, betraying the fundamental principles of socialist internationalism.

In 1974, Leela joined the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—the predecessor of the SEP—after meeting and discussing with party members. The RCL was conducting a principled struggle against the SLFP-LSSP-CPSL government for the independent mobilisation of the working class, rallying the rural poor and the Tamil minority on the basis of Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution.

Her decision to join the party was a major turning point in her life. She rejected the petty-bourgeois radicalism of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), based on guerrillaism and Sinhala chauvinism, which was very active in the rural south of the country.

Reading the RCL's Sinhala-language newspaper *Kamkaru Mawatha* [Workers' Path], Leela learned about the JVP's petty-bourgeois radicalism and its communalist politics. In April 1971, the JVP had led an adventurist uprising, which was brutally crushed by the coalition government and resulted in the deaths of around 15,000 rural youth.

Leela joined the party during a time when the global economy had plunged into a major crisis known as the "oil shock," triggered by a fourfold increase in oil prices by oil-exporting countries in response to the depreciation of the US dollar.

Like governments around the world, Sri Lanka's coalition

government introduced measures to impose the burden of the crisis onto the backs of the masses. The price of essentials increased and scarcities, including rice—the country's main staple food—were rampant. Rural areas were subjected to limits on the sale or transport of farmers' produce. Mass hostility grew against the coalition government, on top of the widespread anger over the repression of 1971.

The RCL intensified its political fight against the government, demanding that the LSSP and CPSL "Break from the coalition government! For a workers' and peasants' government!" The party fought to build Workers' Coordinating Committees in the trade unions to unite struggles and demanded the "Release of all political prisoners!" More than 200 JVP leaders and cadres had been jailed.

The heart of this campaign was the struggle to break the influence of coalition politics and the trade union bureaucracies over the working class. This struggle won considerable support among workers, the rural poor, rural youth and university students and led to an expansion of the party and its youth wing, the Young Socialists.

A sharp battle was launched in trade unions, including in the Stalinist-led ACGCU, where Leela and two other party colleagues were members. They were able to build a workers' committee in the union, winning more members. Government authorities subjected her and another party member to punitive transfers out of the department.

Discontent in the working class erupted in a general strike in December 1976 and, although the strike was suppressed, it marked the beginning of the end of the coalition government. The right-wing United National Party (UNP) of J.R. Jayawardene exploited the LSSP's betrayal in 1964, which undermined the independence of the working class, and the continuation of that treacherous policy by the LSSP and the CPSL in a second coalition, and won power in 1977. Within a year, he had rammed through a new constitution with an autocratic executive presidency.

The UNP government, in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) directives, imposed an "open-market economic policy." Under its austerity program, the government began dismantling state institutions, eliminating jobs and wiping out social subsidies, while increasing the price of essentials. Compelled by widespread opposition, the public sector trade unions called a general strike in July 1980. Using emergency powers, President Jayawardene sacked about 100,000 strikers.

The UNP regime was able to inflict this major defeat on the working class by exploiting the treachery of the LSSP, CPSL and the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), an opportunist breakaway faction of the LSSP, along with the trade union bureaucrats. They politically disarmed workers, insisting that the draconian emergency regulations could be ignored and that the government could be brought to its knees by militancy alone.

The RCL and its cadres vigorously fought for mobilisation of every section of workers to defend the strikers, rally the rural poor and develop a political struggle against the government. Leela was among the many RCL members who lost their jobs. Despite facing immense difficulties due to the loss of her only means of income, she and other comrades continued party work.

In early 1983, the RCL was the only working-class party to contest the Colombo Municipal Council elections. Leela was among the 68 RCL candidates.

Facing bitter opposition in the working class, the Jayawardene government systematically inflamed anti-Tamil communalism. It moved troops to the North and East in the name of suppressing the so-called terrorism of Tamil separatist groups, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The real aim of this agenda was to divide workers along ethnic lines while suppressing the Tamil minority. The RCL consistently opposed these government's reactionary communalism and worked to unite workers on socialist policies.

As part of this struggle, on July 12, 1983, Leela issued an open letter through the RCL's newspaper *Kamkaru Mawatha* headlined, "Are the All-Ceylon Government Clerical Union Leaders Sleeping?" to challenge the union's Stalinist leadership.

She accused the Stalinist union leaders of refusing to convene members' meetings and of being political props of the government as it was deliberately inflaming communal tensions. The letter explained that the government was conducting "total war against the working class and the oppressed masses. The aim of the ruling class is to establish a dictatorship in order to place the burden of the capitalist crisis on the backs of workers and the oppressed masses."

The communal frenzy was aimed at pushing ahead with privatisation, slashing free education and health care and opening these sectors to exploitation by private capital. The open letter raised the demands: "Withdraw troops from the North and East, repeal emergency laws, abolish the Terrorism Act, release all political prisoners," and "recognise the right to self-determination of the Tamil people."

While calling on union members to oppose their leaders' betrayals and join the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership, the letter stated that "workers must prepare politically to bring down the UNP government, and that the fight for a workers' and peasants' government is urgent."

Leela's open letter demonstrated how deeply she was rooted in the principles of the SEP/RCL's struggle for Trotskyism.

Less than a week later, the UNP government used the killing of 13 soldiers by Tamil militants to instigate a murderous anti-Tamil pogrom throughout the island. Violent attacks on Tamils, in which UNP thugs were prominent, erupted on an unprecedented scale. The homes and shops of Tamils were torched, and hundreds of

people were killed. The government and police allowed the rampage to continue unimpeded for four days and imposed draconian censorship to block any news.

The pogrom marked the onset of a bloody and protracted communal war waged by successive Colombo governments that only ended in May 2009. An estimated 100,000 Tamil civilians were killed, including at least 40,000 during the final months of the war, according to the UN. The JVP backed the reactionary war to the hilt, while trade union bureaucracies played the critical role of subordinating workers' struggles to the war effort.

Amid repressive attacks by successive governments, the RCL waged an intransigent political struggle against the war and for the unity of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers. Together with local branch party colleagues, Leela engaged in political work in central Colombo and its surrounding neighbourhoods.

Leela was enthusiastic about the launching of the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998. During campaigns, she was indefatigable in collecting material for articles published by the WSWS. With a donation from a party sympathiser, she bought a computer to read WSWS articles. Despite confronting various health problems complicated by high blood pressure, as well as physical difficulties and economic hardship, Leela never lost her political determination.

She was very actively involved in the SEP's investigation into the collapse of Colombo's main garbage dump at Meethotamulla on April 14, 2017. The disaster killed at least 32 people and affected more than 146 families. She participated in the Independent Workers' Inquiry Committee (IWIC), established by the SEP. Its report, released in 2018, politically indicted successive Colombo governments and local authorities, demonstrating their responsibility for the disaster.

Comrade Leela's death occurred amid a historic crisis of global capitalism, characterised by soaring social inequality, the danger of catastrophic world war and the economic collapse of the Sri Lankan economy, which produced a sustained mass uprising against the Rajapakse regime in April–July 2022.

The SEP was the only party that fought for the independent mobilisation of the working class to rally the rural poor and fight for a workers' and peasants' government on the basis of an international socialist program. It called for the building of workers' action committees in every workplace and the establishment of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses to carry forward this struggle. Until her final illness, Leela was deeply engaged in this struggle.

Comrade Leela's death is a sad loss for the SEP, but the memory of this courageous fighter lives on today in the party's struggle.



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