Comrade K.S. Ganeshadev (1939–2026): A fighter for Trotskyism

K. Ratnayake
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Comrade K.S. Ganeshadev, a long-time member of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) and its successor, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), died on March 22, 2026, at the age of 87.

His demise occurred in a hospital in Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, due to long-term health complications related to diabetes. He is survived by his three children, Rosa, Leon and Keerthi, and two younger brothers.

The SEP pays tribute to his courageous decades-long struggle for Trotskyism and extends its deep sympathies to his children and relatives.

Ganesh—as he was known among party comrades—joined the RCL in 1970. He quickly became a full-time cadre and was elected to the RCL's Central Committee and Political Committee (PC). He played an important role in the struggle to build the Trotskyist movement in the Indian subcontinent, but had been unable to carry on active political work for nearly a decade and a half due to difficult health issues.

Ganesh was born on May 15, 1939, in Malaysia, where his family had settled. When Ganesh was 16, the family returned to their native village of Alavai in northern Sri Lanka, about 30 kilometres from Jaffna city. He completed his studies in the science stream in the English medium at Nelliady Central College, near his hometown.

The decade following the family's return to Sri Lanka was marked by sharp political upheavals. The Sri Lankan ruling elite, fearing the growing influence of the Trotskyist movement in the working class, resorted to vicious campaigns of anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide workers on communal lines. That began soon after independence in 1948 when the United National Party (UNP) government abolished the fundamental citizenship rights of hundreds of thousands of Indian-origin Tamil-speaking plantation workers.

In 1956, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won the national election in a campaign based on the reactionary policy of making Sinhala the only official language, thus reducing Tamil speakers to second-class citizens and fomenting bitter communal divisions. The SLFP's campaign was a reaction by sections of the ruling class to intensifying class struggle, as demonstrated by the upheavals of the 1953 Hartal—a general strike and nationwide shutdown.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which still claimed to be Trotskyist, opposed the communal policy, calling for both Sinhala and Tamil to be recognised as official languages. It opposed the 1956 Official Language Bill and urged workers to physically defend Tamils from Sinhala racialist thugs. It also opposed the turn by bourgeois Tamil parties to the politics of Tamil nationalism and separatism.

In the predominantly Tamil north of the country, Ganesh rejected the communal politics of the Tamil parties and supported the LSSP. He joined its youth organisation in Jaffna around 1958, just after completing his secondary education.

His attraction to Trotskyism did not emerge in a vacuum. Since the early 1940s, the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the Indian subcontinent section of the Trotskyist Fourth International, had won considerable influence in the Jaffna Peninsula as well as throughout the country.

However, under the impact of a post-World War II opportunist tendency that emerged in the Fourth International led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, the BLPI was liquidated under the guise of entry work into the existing mass workers' parties. The BLPI in Sri Lanka amalgamated in 1950 with the LSSP, which affiliated with the Pabloite International and opposed the defence of orthodox Trotskyism by the ICFI established in 1953.

While it opposed the SLFP's Sinhala-only policy, the LSSP increasingly accommodated to its Sinhala populist politics and in 1964 joined the bourgeois SLFP government of Sirima Bandaranaike. This was a historic betrayal of the most fundamental principles of the Trotskyist movement—socialist internationalism and the political independence of the working class from agencies of the bourgeoisie. It enabled the Bandaranaike government to cling to power amid the mass upsurge of the working class in the 21 demands movement.

The LSSP's political degeneration was covered up by the Pabloite International, which in doing so paved the path for its entry into a bourgeois government. In opposition to the LSSP's betrayal, a layer of youth turned to the ICFI and, under its political guidance, founded the RCL in 1968.

The LSSP's betrayal of the working class opened the door for the emergence of petty-bourgeois movements based on communal politics. Among radicalised Sinhala youth in the south of the island, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) was established in the mid-1960s on the basis of a crude admixture of Maoist-Castroite guerrillaism and Sinhala populism. In the north, armed Tamil groups such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged, preaching separatism.

Ganesh, opposing the LSSP betrayal, briefly supported the LSSP (R), a faction that opposed the betrayal and split from the LSSP, but retained affiliation with the Pabloite International. He worked as a freelance journalist for the *Sun*, a mainstream newspaper published in Colombo in the early 1970s.

Like many, Ganesh soon became disgusted with the opportunist politics of the LSSP (R). The party sought to revive the United Left Front—the LSSP-led alliance with the Stalinist and Sinhala-communal Mahajana Eksath Peramuna—while promoting trade union militancy devoid of a revolutionary socialist perspective.

Ganesh met RCL comrades who were extensively campaigning against the LSSP betrayal and fighting for the unity of the working class based on a revolutionary socialist program. After discussions with the RCL, including General Secretary Keerthi Balasuriya, he came to understand that the roots of the LSSP's betrayal lay in Pabloism, and he joined the RCL.

Ganesh quickly joined the RCL's full-time staff and its leading committees. He played a critical role in developing the party's political

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work among the Tamil population in Colombo, Jaffna and the central hill-country plantation areas. He wrote regularly for *Tholilalar Seyidi* (Workers' News), the RCL's Tamil-language newspaper.

In April 1971, the coalition government brutally crushed the JVP's adventurist armed rebellion, killing and jailing tens of thousands of rural youth and JVP members. The government turned against the RCL, when it opposed the ruthless repression. The party was virtually illegalised and its newspapers banned. Ganesh was involved in helping to print the party's underground publications.

When legal publication resumed under new names in 1972, Ganesh worked on the editorial staff of *Tholilalar Pathai* (Workers Path). He was instrumental in winning Tamil workers and youth to the party's perspective of uniting workers in opposition to the divisive communal politics of Tamil separatism.

S.K. Chandrasekeran, who was one of the first in the north to be won to the RCL, told the author of this article that he had been looking towards the Communist Party (Peking Wing). However, his discussions with Ganesh convinced him of the treacherous role of Maoism, the Chinese variant of Stalinism, and won him to Trotskyism. Chandrasekeran and others went on to form the Jaffna branch of the RCL.

N. Panchacharan, a public sector employee in Colombo, said he had been caught up in the wave of Tamil nationalism that erupted after the second SLFP coalition government imposed a communal constitution that made Buddhism the country's state religion and Sinhala the official language. Ganesh played a leading role in campaigning among Tamil workers and persuading them of the need to unite across ethnic lines. Panchacharan and several others established a party branch in Colombo.

In 1979, the RCL, understanding that it was essential to unite the working class in South Asia, took the critical step of sending Ganesh to Chennai, then called Madras, to begin the work of building a section of the ICFI in India. In the midst of World War II, Trotskyists from what was known as Ceylon had taken the initiative in forming the BLPI throughout the subcontinent. But in the late 1940s, the BLPI leaders, encouraged by Michel Pablo, had sent the party into the petty-bourgeois Congress Socialist Party in India.

An article co-authored by Ganesh and veteran SEP leader Nanda Wickremesinghe explained: "The dissolution of the BLPI had a devastating impact on the development of the Fourth International in South Asia. The Trotskyist movement in India was effectively liquidated." The move, together with the LSSP's betrayal in 1964, greatly strengthened the Stalinist parties in India, particularly the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM.

Ganesh had to start from scratch. Settling in a working-class area of Madras, he established contacts among workers and young people and discussed the need for a Trotskyist perspective. He used *Tholilalar Pathai*, published in Sri Lanka, to assist in his political work and also received other publications of the ICFI.

One of his chief political tasks was to explain the class-collaborationist policies of the Stalinist parties and their support for capitalist parties, including the Indian National Congress. Indian Stalinism had its roots in the counter-revolutionary role of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, which betrayed the October Revolution and the program of world socialist revolution. As he had done in Sri Lanka, Ganesh, with the assistance of visiting RCL comrades, gathered an initial group of ICFI supporters.

The ICFI's split in 1985–86 with the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain was a fundamental turning point for the work of all sections of the Trotskyist movement, including the RCL. The political degeneration of the WRP was manifested in its abandonment of the political struggle against Pabloism and its ever-more blatant opportunist orientation to Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism, and, in Britain, to the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy.

When Keerthi Balasuriya visited Madras at the end of 1985 and held discussions with Ganesh and other comrades, Ganesh enthusiastically supported the ICFI's positions. In 1986 and 1987, David North, now chairman of the WSWS International Editorial Board, visited Madras with Balasuriya and held extensive discussions with Ganesh and other comrades on the issues involved in the split.

Ganesh and the group of ICFI supporters issued a statement on December 12, 1986 that fully endorsed "the struggle waged by the majority sections of the International Committee against the renegade clique of Healy, Banda and Slaughter [WRP leaders] who, through their attacks on the political and theoretical foundations of the ICFI, sought to subordinate the vanguard of the international working class to Stalinism, Social Democracy and the national bourgeoisie and thereby to imperialism itself."

The group of Indian ICFI supporters in Tamil Nadu confronted many political challenges. As well as the Stalinist dominance of the trade unions, communal war in Sri Lanka fuelled the strengthening of parties based on Tamil nationalism among a population who closely identified with the plight of Tamils just across the Palk Strait in Sri Lanka.

The right-wing UNP government, which had come to power in 1977 amid widespread hostility to the SLFP coalition government, was, on the advice of the IMF, among the first in the world to implement drastic pro-market policies. As mass opposition erupted to the onslaught on jobs, wages and essential services, the UNP increasingly stirred up divisive anti-Tamil chauvinism which culminated in a murderous, island-wide anti-Tamil pogrom and provoked all-out war with the LTTE.

Concerned about political instability in southern Tamil Nadu, the Indian government intervened directly in Sri Lanka. Under the July 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord, Indian troops were deployed in the north and east of the island to disarm the LTTE and limited power-sharing concessions were granted to the Tamil elite.

In coordination with the RCL in Colombo, Ganesh and his comrades intervened in this complex situation. They distributed party literature and held numerous discussions with workers and youth, exposing the political hypocrisy of the Indian government and warning of the immense dangers of communal politics for the working class.

A sharp political struggle had to be waged to explain that the basic democratic rights of the Tamil masses could be achieved only through the united struggle of the working class for socialism in Sri Lanka and India. Ganesh wrote a series of articles to address these issues in the party's Tamil-language publications.

Leading Sri Lankan comrades, including Balasuriya and Wije Dias, who took over as RCL general secretary after Balasuriya's premature death in 1987, visited India and worked with Ganesh to develop the party's work there. All enjoyed Ganesh's warm hospitality.

In later years, Ganesh, together with visiting RCL comrades, extended the party's political work to Calcutta (now Kolkata), the capital of West Bengal, where he spent extended periods. Calcutta had been a major centre of BLPI work in the 1940s.

In 1991, amid the first Gulf War, as part of the ICFI's campaign for the Berlin World Conference of Workers against Imperialist War and Colonialism on November 16–17, Ganesh helped organise meetings in Calcutta that were addressed by Sri Lankan comrades including Dias. The Berlin Conference was a significant milestone in mobilising the working class against imperialist war, as the United States initiated decades of war to reassert its global hegemony in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy.

During the campaign, former BLPI members including Dulal Bose, Druba Jyoti Majumdar and Ganesh Datta, together with their associate Nirmal Samaj Pathi, met Ganesh and other comrades who clarified the role of Pabloism in destroying the BLPI. They broke with the Pabloite United Secretariat and joined the ICFI, recognising it as the continuation of orthodox Trotskyism.

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Ganesh was very enthusiastic about the ICFI's important advance in launching the *World Socialist Web Site* in 1998. He wrote articles himself and co-authored others on important issues for the WSWS in the years that followed.

Those who worked with him recall his dedication, energy and persistence under difficult conditions. Even in his later years, when increasingly incapacitated by illness, he remained active, bringing his experience and determination to the task of educating younger comrades and defending the principles of Trotskyism.

Indian supporter Akash Dev, who helped Ganesh during his last years and his final hospitalisation, explained to this writer: "Ganesh was very enthusiastic about the political analysis developed by the WSWS on a daily basis. He used to ask me to explain what was in the WSWS because he was unable to read the site. He had great confidence in Trotskyism and the ICFI."

The memory of comrade Ganeshadev's lifelong dedication to the fight for Trotskyism in the working class will live on among workers and party comrades in Sri Lanka and internationally.

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