

## R. Umanath: An Extraordinary Communist

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Comrade R. Umanath has died at the ripe old age of 92 in a hospital in Tiruchirapalli, Tamilnadu. Umanath was an outstanding example of how a Communist leader emerges because of one's deep Marxist-Leninist convictions and total dedication to building the working class movement.

Umanath belonged to a pioneering generation of Communists in Tamilnadu who began his political life by organising industrial workers. His entire political career of seven decades was marked by his close involvement with the working class movement. It is this association which sustained his Marxist-Leninist convictions.

Umanath was born in Kasargod, which belonged to the old Madras Presidency under British rule, in a Konkani-speaking family. While in school in Kozhikode, he was inspired by the freedom struggle and came in touch with the fledgling Left in the anti-imperialist movement. He went on to study at the Annamalai University in Chidambaram where he joined the Communist group in the campus. He joined the Party in 1939 and decided to leave his studies and work for the Communist party which was functioning underground. It was a momentous decision for the young student which set the course for his revolutionary career.

Like the early Communists, Umanath had go through an arduous period of being imprisoned by the British rulers and working underground off and on. After working among the industrial workers in Coimbatore, he was put in jail and made a daring escape from the jail in 1948. He went on to work among the railway workers in Tiruchirapalli and became one of the key organizers of different sections of the workers. Umanath emerged as an able and effective trade union leader in Tamilnadu in the 1950s.

Umanath was a Communist agitator and speaker *par excellence*. Like his distinguished senior P. Ramamurthi, Umanath developed into a powerful orator in Tamil and English. I remember the days when I joined the Party, when the speeches of Umanath in public meetings or at trade union gatherings would have a great impact on me. When he was a member of the Lok Sabha in 1962 and 1967 from Pudukottai constituency, his speeches in Parliament were effective interventions on behalf of the Communist group. Later in 1977 and 1980, he was

elected to the Tamilnadu state legislature. Both in Parliament and the Assembly, Umanath set an exemplary record of how a Communist parliamentarian should behave.

When Umanath joined the Party Centre after being elected to the Polit Bureau at the 15<sup>th</sup> Congress in Chandigarh in 1995, he brought with him a wealth of experience drawn from decades of struggles of the working class and of applying the Marxist outlook to developing the Communist party. He was a leader who had both the experience of building the working class movement and also of working in the Parliament and the legislature. It was this valuable experience through which he contributed to the political and organisational work of the Party Centre.

Umanath made a notable contribution to the inner-Party discussions in the Polit Bureau and the Central Committee during the updating of the Party Programme. The clarity and depth of his Marxist understanding was manifested in the debate on the various formulations that were adopted in the Party Programme in 2000. Umanath was also known for expressing his views in a forthright and frank manner in the inner-Party discussions. He never withheld criticism when he felt something was wrong, nor, consider who the person the criticism was directed at. At the same time, Umanath would scrupulously observe the norms of democratic centralism and never speak about such matters outside the Party forums.

I had the good fortune of working with Umanath at the Party Centre for more than a decade. All the PB members at the Centre would consider his views and opinions on various political developments when we were formulating our response. Umanath could be relied upon to take a consistent class position on the various international and national political developments.

Umanath was a leader who was free of all material desires. Till the end, he donated his entire pension he got as a former MP and MLA to the Party and lived on the Party wage. He and Pappa Umanath, his life partner and comrade, were both dedicated to the Party and had to make innumerable sacrifices in their married life as wholetimers of the Party. Their daughters were brought up to share their political convictions.

When the news came that he was critically ill, I went to Trichy to visit him in the hospital on May 15. He was conscious and when I told him that I had come to Trichy just to see him, he smiled and said, "a

friend in need" leaving the rest of the saying unsaid which is, "a friend in need is a friend indeed". Though we are all grieved at the loss of a beloved comrade, at the same time, we should celebrate the life of an outstanding Communist who made such an extraordinary contribution to the Party and the working class movement.

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