

25 years since Keerthi Balasuriya's death

South Asia's foremost Marxist of the second half of the 20th century

Part one

By Wije Dias
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The following is the first part of a two-part series on the political struggle of RCL general secretary Keerthi Balasuriya for proletarian internationalism. Part two was published on December 28.

Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding general secretary of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), died of a sudden heart attack at the age of just 39 on December 18, 1987. His untimely demise cut short a life consciously devoted for more than two decades to the struggle to revive the revolutionary strategy of proletarian internationalism among workers and the oppressed masses in Sri Lanka and throughout the region. The RCL was the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

On the day of his death, Comrade Keerthi was drafting a document for the ICFI, clarifying the political tasks confronting the world Trotskyist movement in the aftermath of the 1985-86 split with the renegades of the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP). He was concentrating in particular on the issues posed for the RCL and the working class throughout South Asia, in the wake of India's military-political intervention in Sri Lanka from July 1987.

In an obituary written at the time, Workers League National Secretary David North stated: "Despite all the immense political pressures confronting the Revolutionary Communist League in Sri Lanka, Comrade Keerthi would not be deterred from his international responsibilities as a leader of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The great political ideal which inspired all his works was the cause of proletarian internationalism, which for Comrade Keerthi, found its

supreme expression in the struggle to build the world party of socialist revolution."

Addressing the hundreds of workers and youth at Keerthi's funeral, North emphasised the enormous significance of his role: "In the period immediately ahead, the workers, not only in Asia but throughout the world, will read and study the writings of Comrade Keerthi."

The upsurge of the class struggle today, driven by the ongoing breakdown of global capitalism since 2008, has underlined the necessity of studying the profound theoretical and political contribution made by Keerthi Balasuriya. Whether in North Africa or the Middle East, in the historically backward and the advanced countries of the world, the urgent need is to resolve the crisis of leadership of the working class on the basis of Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution.

Keerthi joined a radicalised group of youth in early 1966 that was looking to overcome the political problems and confusion generated by the historic betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1964. The LSSP was the first party in the world calling itself Trotskyist to join a capitalist government when it entered a coalition with the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) of Madame Sirima Bandaranaike.

This betrayal took place at a time when the working class and youth were moving into a struggle of revolutionary proportions against the SLFP government. The major trade union federations, in both government and private sectors, had formed a common front called the Joint Committee of Trade Union Organisations (JCTUO) and were threatening industrial action if their list of 21 demands was not met by the government. Young people

were being radicalised. University students were protesting against the Vietnam War and the murder of Patrice Lumumba of Congo as well as in support of the workers' struggles and against the attacks on free education.

The LSSP's entry into the Bandaranaike government created widespread bewilderment among workers and youth. The LSSP shut down the 21-demands movement. More thoughtful layers of workers and youth who wanted to fight the LSSP's treachery were then disoriented and demoralised by the LSSP (Revolutionary) or LSSP (R), which had broken from the LSSP and condemned its betrayal. The LSSP (R) refused to break from the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International led by Earnest Mandel, which provided the political cover for the LSSP's opportunism. The LSSP (R) blocked all attempts to discuss the international political roots of the LSSP's degeneration, leaving many of its followers, particularly the youth, frustrated but not silent.

The Shakthi group was formed to seek a way out of the political impasse. Keerthi, still a school student preparing for his university entrance exam, joined this group of young political activists. The group had a rather heterogeneous and centrist character and included in its ranks those who were critical of the LSSP (R) but from the standpoint of returning to the LSSP. That orientation was resisted by members of the group but it was only through the ICFI's intervention that the fundamental theoretical issues were clarified.

A visit in 1966 by Tony Banda, a leader of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the ICFI's British section, brought the youth in contact with Wilfred "Spike" Pereira. Comrade Spike was a veteran Trotskyist who had been waging a political battle within the LSSP (R), almost single-handedly, on the basis of the ICFI's struggle against Pabloite opportunism. Spike's documents, including a thorough critique of the centrist politics of the Shakthi group, and his courageous challenge to the United Secretariat's defence of Castro, were eye openers to these youth.

The young people who were drawn to the ICFI formed the Virodaya group. An intense study and discussion began of the documents of the ICFI, which was formed in 1953 in a struggle against an opportunist tendency inside the Fourth International led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. The Pabloites abandoned the fight for the political independence of the working class and capitulated to the Stalinist, Social Democratic and bourgeois nationalist bureaucracies that dominated the

workers' movement in different countries. The British SLL had just waged a protracted struggle against the political retreat of the Socialist Workers Party in the US which reunified with the Pabloites in 1963. In the struggle for theoretical clarity within the Virodaya group, Keerthi emerged as the foremost fighter for the ICFI's politics.

Although not yet recognised as a section, the Virodaya group closely followed the writings and work of the ICFI, particularly of the British SLL, and reacted with shock when an editorial written in February 1968 by Mike Banda eulogised the "protracted people's war" being waged by Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Mao Zedong as the "foremost exponent" of guerrilla warfare. Keerthi wrote to the SLL to protest over this glorification of Maoism and the subsequent edition included a brief note indicating the editorial expressed Banda's personal view. This live-and-let-live attitude to Banda's pro-Maoist inclinations was an indication that the SLL was retreating from the principled struggle it had waged against the SWP.

Keerthi showed the same theoretical rigour later that year at the founding congress of the RCL when he opposed a tendency to regard the newly formed party as the continuation of a national revolutionary current tracing its history through the LSSP, LSSP (R) and Shakthi group. He insisted that the continuity of Trotskyism lay in international struggle waged by the ICFI against Pabloism, outside of which no national grouping could maintain a consistently revolutionary orientation. The founding congress unanimously adopted a perspective to wage a revolutionary political fight throughout the Indian sub-continent on the basis of the Theory of Permanent Revolution. At the age of just 19, Keerthi was elected RCL general secretary.

To be continued.

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