

Comrade Wije Dias: A fighter for Trotskyism (August 27, 1941 – July 27, 2022)

Statement of the International Committee of the Fourth International
28 July 2022

It is with profound sorrow that the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) announces the death of Comrade Wije Dias. Comrade Wije was the general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), from December 1987 until this past May, when he was elected to the newly-created post of party chairperson.

Wije, who would have turned 81 next month, died in Colombo yesterday morning after suffering a heart attack. He had a long history of coronary artery disease and had undergone bypass surgery in 2013. He recovered fully and remained intensely active in the leadership of the party up until the last day of his life.

Comrade Wije's political life spanned six decades and encompassed virtually the entire period in which the Fourth International has been led by the International Committee. He devoted his adult life to the struggle for the liberation of the working class from want, war and all forms of capitalist oppression.

Wije was an implacable protagonist of the socialist internationalist program of permanent revolution and fighter for the political independence of the working class. He was unyielding in his defense of Marxist and Trotskyist principles because he had witnessed the catastrophic consequences—in the form of political disorientation, reaction and tragic loss of life—that result from their abandonment and betrayal.

Wije was part of a remarkable group of young people who, under the political guidance of the ICFI, the organization of orthodox Trotskyists founded in 1953 to defend the program of world socialist revolution against Pabloite opportunism, drew the key political lessons of the historic betrayal of the Sri Lankan working class by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).

After entering the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya in 1962, Wije joined the youth movement of the LSSP, which, while it drew on the long heritage of the fight for Trotskyism in Sri Lanka, had taken an ambivalent stand on the 1953 split. It refused to endorse the "Open Letter" issued by American Trotskyist James P. Cannon and leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) that established the International Committee.

The LSSP was the dominant force in the working class. However, with the encouragement of Ernest Mandel and Michel Pablo, it was more and more openly repudiating socialist politics in favor of parliamentary and popular frontist maneuvers and trade unionism, and rapidly capitulating to the Sinhala chauvinist politics of the ruling class.

Pabloism was a petty-bourgeois liquidationist tendency that arose in the Fourth International under conditions of the post-Second World War restabilization of capitalism and sought to transform it into an adjunct of Stalinism, social democracy and, in the lesser-developed countries, bourgeois nationalism.

In 1964, the LSSP betrayed a powerful working class upsurge, the "21 demands" movement, that was shaking the foundation of bourgeois rule on the island. The LSSP assumed the role of principal social prop of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie by entering a capitalist government led by the

"Sinhalese First" Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

The betrayal represented an open repudiation of socialist internationalism and Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated the incapacity of any section of the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development like Sri Lanka to meet the democratic aspirations and social needs of the masses.

The actions of the LSSP coincided with the degeneration of the Socialist Workers Party in the United States during the mid-1950s and early 1960s. In 1963, the SWP moved to reunify with the Pabloites. A minority within the SWP opposed unprincipled reunification and in 1964 issued a letter demanding a discussion on the "Great Betrayal" of the LSSP in Sri Lanka. They were expelled from the SWP, forming the American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI) and, in 1966, the Workers League, the predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party (US).

Wije's response to these events would prove to be the crucial turning point in his life. Repelled by the LSSP's betrayal, Wije was part of a group of young Trotskyists who, after a period of intense discussion between 1964 and 1968, came to recognize that the ICFI was correct for insisting that the LSSP's collapse as a Trotskyist party was a product of Pabloism.

These discussions culminated in the establishment of the Revolutionary Communist League as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI. The leading role in this struggle was played by Keerthi Balasuriya, who was elected as the RCL's general secretary when it was founded in 1968.

In founding the RCL, Keerthi and his comrades understood that it was not enough just to break organisationally with the LSSP, but it was necessary to break politically with Pabloism, which had provided the political cover for the betrayal. The RCL paid a great deal of attention to exposing the centrist politics of the LSSP (R), which the Pabloites hastily put together after expelling the top LSSP leaders to cover their tracks.

The struggle of the RCL-SEP in the ensuing decades would largely revolve around the fight to overcome the political consequences of the LSSP's betrayal. By shackling the working class to capitalist rule and promoting the ethnic-communal politics of the Sri Lankan ruling class it opened the door to the rise of petty-bourgeois radical politics in the form of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which mixed Castroism, Maoism and Sinhala chauvinism, and the Tamil nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In what was to establish a hallmark for the principled politics of the RCL, in 1971 it exposed the political bankruptcy of an isolated rebellion of rural youth led by the JVP, while campaigning for the working class to defend the JVP leaders and cadres from vicious state repression. In doing so, the RCL was also subject to state repression and compelled to operate underground.

The second LSSP-SLFP coalition of 1970–76 came, under conditions of intensifying world economic crisis, into bitter conflict with the working class. Exploiting the political confusion this created, J.R. Jayawardene and his right-wing United National Party (UNP) came to power in 1977. They

promptly launched a vast assault on the working class, opening the island up to global investment, provoked a general strike in 1980, and established an authoritarian executive presidency while whipping up Sinhalese chauvinism. Ultimately, this led to the outbreak in 1983 of an ethnic war that would convulse the island for the next quarter century.

The RCL-SEP stood alone in opposing the war and the chauvinist Sri Lankan bourgeoisie and its state from the standpoint of revolutionary defeatism and socialist internationalism. While agitating for the immediate withdrawal of all security forces from the Tamil majority north and east, the RCL opposed the communalist politics of the LTTE, which sought to secure the support of India and the imperialist powers, and fought to unite the Sinhalese and Tamil workers and rural poor in the fight for the United Socialist States of Lanka and Tamil Eelam.

In 1985–86, the RCL played a critical and decisive role within the leadership of the International Committee in its opposition to the national opportunist degeneration of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in Britain. The opposition to the betrayal by the WRP of Trotskyist principles was led by the Workers League, the US section of the ICFI, and its national secretary David North. Keerthi worked closely with North in drafting the main documents produced by the ICFI, elaborating the political basis of the break with the WRP.

In a tribute to Wije Dias on the occasion of his 75th birthday, North wrote that Keerthi's "exceptional contribution reflected the immense experience and political firmness of the RCL leadership and cadre, derived from previous decades of struggle for Trotskyism."

It is for this reason that the RCL was able to endure the untimely and totally unexpected loss of Comrade Keerthi in December 1987. His death, at the age of 39, was a cruel and tragic loss to the Revolutionary Communist League and the International Committee. The fact that the RCL was able to withstand the impact of Keerthi's death—in the midst of civil war, the attacks of the JVP assassins, and continuous government persecution—was, by any objective standard, a demonstration of the RCL leadership's extraordinary political strength. But it must also be acknowledged—and there is not a single comrade in either the RCL/SEP or the International Committee who would challenge this judgment—that you, Comrade Wije, played the decisive role in maintaining the unity of the party, upholding its revolutionary internationalist orientation, and leading it forward.

The ICFI's defeat of the WRP in 1985–86 marked a definitive turning point in the struggle to defend and develop the program and strategy of world socialist revolution, including by enabling extensive collaboration between the leaders of the Sri Lankan section and their international co-thinkers and comrades.

Keerthi's death coincided with a massive political crisis provoked by the Indian army's occupation of the Tamil north and east under the Indo-Sri Lankan Accord.

Comrade Wije met this challenge with political courage and steadfastness. In the ensuing tumultuous years of civil war, state repression and JVP attacks and chronic political crisis, Wije would more than repay the political confidence invested in him. Indeed, he commanded enormous respect in his own party and among the leaders and cadre of the entire ICFI.

In 2010, Comrade Wije suffered the loss of Piyaseeli, his wife and comrade who was an outstanding political and cultural figure on the island in her own right.

Three years later, Wije underwent bypass surgery. Despite declining health and the physical difficulties that naturally attend old age, he

remained politically active, providing leadership and political counsel based on his vast knowledge and experience, to the last days of his life. He attended a meeting of the Sri Lankan editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* on Tuesday.

In the months preceding his death, he was intimately involved in elaborating the party's response to the mass upsurge of workers and toilers that has convulsed the island since April and earlier this month caused President Gotabaya Rajapakse to resign and flee the country.

Wije played a leading role in the Sri Lankan SEP's Third National Congress in May, and in close collaboration with the ICFI was centrally involved in the writing of the SEP statement, "For a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses in Sri Lanka!" published on July 20, exactly one week before his death. The statement makes clear the SEP's implacable opposition to capitalist rule. Drawing on the vast experiences of the working class over the last century, from the 1917 Russian Revolution to the lessons of the LSSP's 1964 betrayal and the failed Egyptian Revolution of 2011, the statement elaborates a strategy, based on the development of independent organizations of working class struggle, to fight for workers' power and socialism.

Comrade Wije led a full and rich life. He was a powerful orator in both his native Sinhala and English as attested by the many videos of him speaking.

He had vast knowledge of the history of Sri Lanka and India, the international workers movement, and both South Asian and western culture.

He was fearless in his opposition to the class enemy, but even his bitterest enemy could not and dared not question his political integrity.

He had a glowing sense of humor, one that he could very effectively use in exposing the vanity and venality of the political representatives of the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeois opportunists. Despite his richly deserved political stature, Wije was an intensely modest man.

Wije had to navigate the long and difficult circumstances bound up with the colossal betrayals of the working class perpetrated by the Stalinists, social-democrats and their Pabloite accomplices. But he lived to see a new revolutionary upsurge of the working class in Sri Lanka—one that events are rapidly revealing to be a harbinger for the entire world under conditions of systemic global capitalist crisis.

Comrade Wije Dias is a monumental figure in the fight for Trotskyism in Sri Lanka. His life and legacy now enter into the history of the struggle for socialism. They will serve to inspire, but even more importantly to politically orient workers and young people in what will and must prove to be the decade of world socialist revolution.



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