

Sri Lankan SEP celebrates 85th birthday of veteran Trotskyist leader Nanda Wickremesinghe

Our correspondents

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On October 15, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held an event to celebrate the 85th birthday of Comrade Nanda Wickremesinghe, who is known to supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) around the world as Comrade Wicks. He is the oldest living Trotskyist leader who took part in the founding of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the SEP's predecessor organization, in 1968.

A group of leading SEP members, including General Secretary Deepal Jayasekara and WSWs National Editor K. Ratnayake, another founding member of the RCL, participated in person in the event. Dozens of party members joined the celebration via Zoom. Despite age-related health issues, Comrade Wicks was delighted with the event, particularly the birthday greetings delivered by his comrades in Sri Lanka and the ICFI leadership, including David North, chairperson of the International Editorial Board of the WSWs and the national chairman of the SEP (US).

Jayasekara opened the meeting by wishing Wicks a happy birthday and welcoming comrades who were present and those online on behalf of the SEP Political Committee. He noted this special day was not only an important milestone in the life of comrade Wicks, but also coincided with the 60th anniversary of a critical moment in his political life: the great betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). In 1964, the LSSP, while still claiming to be a "Trotskyist" party, violated the Trotskyist principles of the political independence of the working class and international socialism by entering into a coalition government with the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Jayasekara recalled how Wicks joined a precocious and politically farsighted group of young revolutionaries, including Ratnayake and two late comrades—Keerthi Balasuriya, the founding RCL's general secretary and Wije Dias, who following Keerthi's tragic death at just 39, served as RCL/SEP general secretary from 1987 to 2022. They not only opposed the LSSP's sordid betrayal, but also sought its real political roots. In this they found crucial political guidance from the ICFI, which explained that the roots of the LSSP's betrayal lay not in Colombo, but in Paris, i.e., the centre of Pabloite revisionism. Pabloism had emerged within the Trotskyist Fourth International in the early 1950s as an openly liquidationist tendency that sought to overthrow the Trotskyist program of world socialist revolution and liquidate the sections and cadres of the Fourth International.

The ICFI was founded in 1953 to defend the principles and continuity of the Trotskyist movement against Pabloite revisionism, which expressed the interests of privileged sections of the petty bourgeoisie under conditions of the temporary re-stabilization of world capitalism following World War II. Rejecting the revolutionary role of the working class, Pabloism argued that factions of the Stalinist bureaucracy, bourgeois nationalists, and trade union and social democratic bureaucrats could

bring about, or be pressure into bringing, about revolutionary change. These revisions of Trotskyism were rejected decisively by the ICFI's founding sections, under the leadership of James P. Cannon and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the United States.

The LSSP refused to join with the ICFI and instead lined up with the Pabloite International Secretariat.

The Pabloites encouraged every step of the LSSP's political degeneration along nationalist parliamentary reformist and trade unionist lines, and its adaptation to Sinhala communalist-populism, and thus politically prepared its betrayal in 1964. Just one year before, when the SWP itself succumbed to Pabloite opportunism and broke with the ICFI to rejoin the Pabloites in the so-called United Secretariat, it held up the LSSP as a model of the "mass socialist parties" it wanted to build.

In June 1968, after an intense period of political clarification, and differentiation and demarcation, Wicks and his comrades, including Keerthi, Wije and Ratnayake, founded the RCL, as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI.

Jayasekera continued: "Today we enter into a situation where the political stance taken by those comrades, including Wicks, and the principles of the theory of Permanent Revolution that they fought to defend for six decades have been powerfully vindicated in Sri Lanka and internationally. The lessons of the Trotskyist movement that those comrades have dedicated their entire adult lives to defend and develop are immensely critical to our party and workers and youth who are entering into revolutionary struggles today against the capitalist system."

Jayasekara then read the greetings that David North had sent to Wicks. "This date," wrote North, "is the occasion of a double celebration: your great personal milestone intersects with the sixtieth anniversary of the events that precipitated the founding of the American Committee for the Fourth International (ACFI), the forerunner of the Workers League and the Socialist Equality Party." He was referring to the fact that those who went on to found the ACFI in the fall of 1964 had been expelled from the SWP after they insisted on the urgency of an internal party discussion on the great betrayal of the LSSP—a party with which the SWP had been politically and organizationally aligned up until the very moment its leaders joined the capitalist government of Mde. Bandaranaike and her SLFP.

North concluded by saying: "Dear Wicks: you have achieved a great age, which traverses the whole course of history since the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. You are now able to look over this considerable expanse of political time and say, without a trace of immodesty, that the principles to which you devoted your life have been vindicated. You can say of your life, as Trotsky wrote so memorably of his own: 'If I had to begin all over again, I would, of course, try to avoid this or that mistake, but the main course of my life would remain

unchanged.’

“If I may speak personally, I am immensely grateful to have been privileged to be your close comrade and friend for the last four decades. I have admired your political passion, the wide range of your intellectual and cultural interests, and unflagging courage and devotion to revolutionary principles. But your life journey has not yet run its course, and I hope that your knowledge and vast experience will remain at the service of the ICFI in the struggles that lie immediately before us.”

Speaking at the event, Ratnayake introduced Wicks as a historic figure who dedicated his whole life to building the revolutionary movement. Ratnayake gave a summary of some of the most critical events that had unfolded in the years before the founding congress of the RCL in 1968. One such incident was their opposition to a suggestion by V. Karalasingham, a leader of the LSSP (R) that was formed by former LSSP members who had opposed the 1964 betrayal. Karalasingham put forward a suggestion to the *Sakthi* group in which Wicks and his comrades who would later found the RCL were organised to go back to the LSSP. This was strongly rejected by the group, which at that time had begun to build connections with Gerry Healy and the Socialist Labour League, the British section of the ICFI.

Ratnayake went on to quote from the opening report delivered by David North to the 9th National Congress of the SEP (US) held in early August this year.

The Fourth International is a party of history. Its cadre is collectively engaged in a struggle to put an end to the capitalist system and create the necessary economic and political framework for the liberation of the working class from exploitation and oppression. A task of this world historical magnitude, “the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom”—and upon whose attainment depends the survival of humanity—demands immense and enduring commitment. As Trotsky stated, “There never was a greater task on the earth. Upon each one of us rests a tremendous responsibility.” And he continued: “Our party demands each of us, totally and completely. Let the philistines hunt their own individuality in empty space. For a revolutionary, to give himself entirely to the party signifies finding himself.”

Ratnayake concluded by saying that these lines are totally relevant to the life of comrade Wicks.

Other speakers included Vilani Peiris, a SEP political committee member who, as a decades-long leading member of the RCL/SEP, has over five decades of experience of closely working with Wicks. She recalled how Wicks became a full time revolutionary when he lost his job, bearing immense personal difficulties. Giving an example of his bravery, Vilani recalled how Wicks collaborated with Keerthi Balasuriya to write a booklet in 1983 opposing the moves by President J.R. Jayawardene of the United National Party government to suppress the basic democratic rights of the Tamil people. Leading SEP members Rohantha De Silva, M. Devaraja, Ratnasiri Malalagama and Iranganee also spoke, recalling how they were greatly influenced by Wick’s revolutionary work and example.

Comrades representing the SEP’s sister parties in Australia and Germany also sent their greetings to Wicks. They were also read in full to the gathering:

Richard Phillips, SEP (Australia):

“It was an unforgettable experience for me and other comrades when you came to Australia with Herath to explain the RCL’s fight against the reactionary and murderous Sinhala chauvinist program of the JVP and the necessity for the mobilisation of the Australian and international working class—lessons that are even more powerful and pertinent today. Your meetings with Melbourne building workers and meat workers in other parts of the country were historic.”

Peter Symonds, National Editor of WSWs (Australian SEP):

“You have played your part in reconnecting the working class in Sri Lanka with the Fourth International. The hard-won lessons of the strategic experiences through which you and the party have passed in the past six decades as part of the ICFI help provide a firm theoretical and political guide for workers and youth in the challenging period of revolutionary struggle that has opened up.”

Nick Beams, SEP (Australia):

“From the time you, along with Keerthi, Wije, Ratnayake and others drew the lessons of the 1964 Great Betrayal, that its roots lay not in Colombo but in Paris and turned to the ICFI you have been a stalwart of our movement and have made a major contribution to it.”

Peter Schwarz, for the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (German section of the ICFI):

“We are proud to have comrades like you in our ranks who epitomize a large part of the history of our movement, who have steadfastly held on to the convictions of their youth and inspired generations of revolutionary fighters.”

Speaking briefly at the conclusion of the event, Wicks pointed to the importance of the struggle waged by the world Trotskyist movement to resolve the crisis of revolutionary proletarian leadership, expressed his pride in having been able to contribute to this struggle and thanked the party members who organized the event. He expressed a special thanks for the international greetings, which provided “fresh air for me to breathe.”



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