

# Nanda Wickremesinghe (1939-2025): A lifelong Trotskyist leader

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

23 April 2025

It is with profound sorrow that the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka announces the death of Nanda Wickremesinghe, known among his comrades of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) around the world as Comrade Wicks.

Wicks was one of the comrades, along with the late Keerthi Balasuriya, Wije Dias and current leading member K. Ratnayake, who founded the SEP's predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), in 1968 as the ICFI's Sri Lankan section.

Comrade Wicks died in his sleep in the early hours of April 20. He is survived by his wife Manike, daughters Vera and Swaba, son Leon and his grandchildren.

Nanda Wickremesinghe's political life as a Trotskyist spanned nearly seven decades. Right until the end, despite age-related ailments that forced him to withdraw from active party work, our comrade had never lost his revolutionary spirit.

When comrades visited him a few days before his death, Wicks was excited to hear of the growing working-class militancy in the US against fascistic President Donald Trump. "This is crucial in building our party [the SEP (US)] as a mass party, and for the world revolution," he said.

Comrade Wicks was born on October 15, 1939, just six weeks after the beginning of World War II, in a village called Thalapelakanda, close to the southern town of Deniyaya in Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon). His father was a village school headmaster and his mother a school teacher. He was the fourth of eleven children.

Wicks used to recall that at the age of six he would listen to visiting neighbours discussing the war. The war had badly affected the lives of people in Sri Lanka, which was under British colonial rule and tied to its war efforts.

At the age of 10, he read a biography of Lenin written by a Soviet writer and was enthusiastic to hear news of the 1949 Chinese revolution. The books were available because his father had become a member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Ceylon.

He entered the Dikwella Central College for secondary education, after passing the grade five proficiency examination, and joined classes conducted in the English language.

In August 1958, Wicks entered the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya, the country's premier university, where Marxist politics, particularly Trotskyism, was hotly debated.

Wicks said his pro-Stalinist views were immediately challenged by Trotskyists, who prevailed on the campus. The student union was dominated by supporters of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which had consistently opposed the war and British imperialism, unlike the Stalinist Communist Party. After understanding the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism, he joined the LSSP student group at the university.

In 1962, after graduating from university, Wicks joined the LSSP local in the southern town of Matara. Over the next two years, he worked as a teacher at St. Mary's School in Hambantota, where he educated a group

of students who worked with the party.

The LSSP was a mass working-class party. However, it sided with the revisionist faction that emerged within the Fourth International in the early 1950s, led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. The Pabloites adapted to the stabilisation of world capitalism after the Second World War, rejected the fight for the political independence of the working class and sought to subordinate workers to existing opportunist leaderships—Stalinist, Social Democrat and bourgeois nationalist—by claiming they could be pressured to play a progressive role. In doing so, they repudiated the basic tenets of Marxism, including Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution.

The ICFI was founded in 1953 to defend genuine Trotskyism from this liquidationist tendency. The LSSP's opposition to the ICFI was the beginning of a decade of opportunist backsliding, marked by its adaptation to Sinhala communalism, parliamentarism and trade union syndicalism, all with the encouragement of the Pabloite headquarters in Paris.

In 1964, as the mass "21 demands movement" of the working class shook the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government and the ruling class as a whole, Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike invited the LSSP leaders to form a coalition. At the June 1964 LSSP conference, the majority voted to enter the government, in what was a historic betrayal of Trotskyism. This was the first time a party claiming to be Trotskyist had joined a bourgeois government, with top LSSP leaders assuming ministerial posts and thus defending capitalist rule.

In 1963, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the US, which led the fight against Pabloism in 1953, rejoined the revisionists. The ICFI led a crucial theoretical and political struggle against this reunification. A minority faction of the SWP, which opposed the reunification, called for a discussion on the LSSP's betrayal. For this, they were expelled in 1964 and proceeded to establish the Workers League in 1966, aligned with the ICFI.

At the 1964 LSSP conference, Wicks was a candidate member and supported the minority faction of 159 members that presented a resolution opposing entry into the Bandaranaike government. When the resolution was rejected, they walked out of the conference and formed the LSSP (Revolutionary) or LSSP (R).

At the entrance to the LSSP conference, Wicks met Gerry Healy, leader of the Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British section of the ICFI. Wicks spoke about his meeting with Healy with great enthusiasm, particularly his fearless challenge to the thugs sent by the treacherous LSSP leaders to prevent him entering the conference.

While breaking from the LSSP, the LSSP (R) leaders continued to align with the Pabloite International. They opposed any discussion of the direct responsibility of the Pabloite leadership in Paris for the LSSP betrayal.

The ICFI, led by the SLL, intervened into the political crisis in Sri Lanka created by the LSSP betrayal. Keerthi, Wije and Wicks were among leading youth who took part in the discussion with SLL leaders and came to understand that the betrayal was deeply rooted in Pabloism.

With the guidance of the ICFI, these youth proceeded to form the RCL in Sri Lanka in June 1968. Keerthi, who was theoretically and politically prominent among those youth, was elected as the general secretary of the new party at the age of 19. The formation of the RCL was a turning point, renewing the struggle for Trotskyism in Sri Lanka and the Indian sub-continent.

The LSSP betrayal of socialist internationalism created great confusion among workers and youth. It facilitated the emergence of petty-bourgeois radical organisations such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), based on guerillaism and Sinhala chauvinism in the rural south of the country. In the north, separatist movements including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) emerged. The RCL took the initiative in theoretically exposing these organisations, which rejected Marxism and the revolutionary role of the working class.

Based on its petty-bourgeois politics, the JVP led an adventurist uprising in April 1971, which was brutally crushed by the second coalition government between the SLFP, LSSP and Stalinist CP, killing around 15,000 rural youth. Despite fundamental political differences with the JVP, the RCL waged a concerted campaign against the state repression.

Amid a deepening crisis of world capitalism, the working class increasingly came into conflict with the coalition regime. The RCL intervened in the struggles of workers and built a significant base of support, demanding that the LSSP and CP break with the government and fight for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies.

The second coalition government finally collapsed, paving the way for the right-wing United National Party (UNP) of J.R. Jayawardene to come to power in 1977. The UNP government launched a far-reaching assault on working people through its "open market economic policies." Jayawardene crushed a huge general strike of state employees in 1980 by sacking 100,000 workers.

Amid rising social tensions and opposition, the UNP resorted to whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class, culminating in an island-wide pogrom in 1983 that marked the eruption of open civil war. Over the next 26 years, successive Colombo governments prosecuted the reactionary communal war that devastated the island and, with the support of the trade unions, heaped burdens on the working class.

The RCL/SEP was the only party that consistently opposed the war, defended the democratic rights of Tamils, demanded the withdrawal of the military from the north and east, and called for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia.

As the British Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP), the successor to the SLL, turned to the right in the 1970s and abandoned Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution, the RCL came under political attack and isolation. Wicks was part of the RCL leadership that supported the ICFI's struggle, led by the Workers League, against the WRP renegades in the split of 1985-86 that led to a renaissance of Marxism in the Fourth International.

Keerthi Balasuriya, who had played a critical theoretical and political role in the leadership of the RCL and the International, died in December 1987 at the age of just 39. Amid this terrible loss, Wije Dias succeeded him as general secretary and shouldered the immense responsibility of guiding the party's struggles until his death in July 2022.

Wicks also took on important responsibilities. In 1988, he traveled to the US to take part in discussions for the preparation of the ICFI's first Perspectives document—"The world capitalist crisis and the tasks of the Fourth International"—since the split with the WRP. It provided the analysis of the globalization of production and its political consequences that has been fundamental to the subsequent work of the ICFI.

On his return to Sri Lanka, Wicks and the RCL leadership confronted a fascist campaign by the JVP in 1988-90 in opposition to the 1987 Indo-Lanka Accord that brought Indian peacekeeping troops to the island to

disarm the LTTE. Denouncing the Accord as a betrayal of the nation, the JVP sent its gunmen to kill thousands of political opponents, workers and youth who refused to join its Sinhala chauvinist campaign. Three RCL members were among its victims.

The RCL, with the support of the ICFI, launched a campaign for a united front of workers' parties to take concrete steps to defend the working class and its organisations, including through the formation of workers' defence squads and the preparation of a general strike.

As part of this international campaign, Wicks and the late H.M.B. Herath, an RCL member and trade union leader, traveled to Australia and New Zealand in 1989 to address workers on the need for a united front. Thousands of workers, along with many trade union officials, signed statements supporting the RCL's call.

In 1996, the RCL transformed into the Socialist Equality Party, based on the analysis that the sections of the ICFI, amid the decay of the old opportunist leaderships, had to take responsibility for leading the working class. Wicks and other longstanding RCL leaders brought their enormous political experience to bear in the discussions surrounding the writing of the party's founding document—"The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)"—which drew the necessary political lessons from the protracted struggle for Trotskyism in Sri Lanka.

With the establishment of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) in 1998, Wicks enthusiastically embraced and grasped the historical importance of this development for the working class. He wrote hundreds of articles for the WSWS, covering a wide range of historical and political issues in Sri Lanka and India.

Wicks was a deeply cultured man. In addition to Sinhala and English, he had studied the ancient language of Pali, associated with the rise of Buddhism in India. He had a broad interest in Sri Lankan and world literature. He was familiar with the works of William Shakespeare and other prominent English authors. He had a keen understanding of history, particularly the millennia-long history of South Asia.

We conclude this tribute by quoting from the greetings of comrade David North, chairman of the WSWS international editorial board, sent to Wicks on his 85th birthday last October.

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.

We salute you Comrade Wicks. Future generations will certainly fulfill the historical task to which you dedicated your whole life. Long live the revolutionary memory of Comrade Wicks!



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