

Longstanding Sri Lankan Trotskyist dies

Velupillai Sarawanaperumal (1948-2005)

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Velupillai Sarawanaperumal

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member Velupillai Sarawanaperumal, known affectionately to his comrades and friends as Papa, died early on the morning of April 14 after his lungs failed. His untimely death at the age of just 56 is a great loss to the SEP in Sri Lanka and the international Trotskyist movement. He is survived by his wife, Saraswathie, and 15-year-old son, Paranitharan.

About a thousand mourners attended Sarawanaperumal's funeral at Wannarpannai in Jaffna on April 15—a testimony to his political and personal standing. Fellow workers, party members and supporters, family, relatives and friends came at short notice from Karainagar, Kayts, Nelliady, Vaddukkkodai, Killinochchi, Vavuniya and Jaffna in the country's war-torn northern province as well as from Colombo. About eighty workers from his workplace—the Gurunagar branch of the state-owned Ceynor Corporation near Jaffna—took part.

SEP Central Committee member S. Chandrasekeran spoke at the funeral, explaining the significance of Sarawanaperumal's life and political history. "He did not try to find shortcuts to difficult political problems. Sarawanaperumal was a man who based himself on scientific socialism and was prepared for a lengthy struggle. He wanted to politicise workers and bring socialist politics to them," Chandrasekeran said.

Sarawanaperumal joined the SEP's forerunner—the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)—in 1975. He never abandoned his convictions and in the subsequent three decades fought intransigently for the principles of international socialism despite difficult personal circumstances and bouts of asthma and bronchitis. Like many Tamils in northern Sri Lanka, his health was seriously affected by the country's protracted civil war.

Sarawanaperumal was born on September 7, 1948 at Karainagar about 25 kilometres from Jaffna. His parents were from a comparatively well-off farming family. Sarawanaperumal lost his mother in his early childhood. He was educated at the Karainagar Hindu College and obtained a General Certificate Examination Ordinary Level in Science. To try to get a job, he studied matriculation book-keeping by correspondence and trained as an electrician at the technical college in Jaffna.

Sarawanaperumal was attracted to the RCL in the 1970s in a period of growing political turbulence in Sri Lanka and internationally. The

political climate was profoundly influenced by the decision by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) to abandon its founding Trotskyist principles and join the bourgeois government of Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1964.

The LSSP's rejection of the struggle to unite workers led directly to the growth of middle class radical movements based on communal politics. In the south, rural youth turned to the guerrillism and Sinhala chauvinism of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). In the north and east, Tamil youth began to support various Tamil separatist organisations, including forerunners of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The actions of the second Bandaranaike coalition government of 1970-1977 against Tamils further provoked separatist sentiment. As a government minister, LSSP leader Colvin R. de Silva was responsible for drafting a new constitution that established Sinhala as the official state language and Buddhism as the state religion. Tamil youth reacted in particular to entrenched discrimination over education and jobs.

Despite the pressures of rising communalism, Sarawanaperumal was attracted to a class approach based on unifying, rather than dividing, workers. He rejected simplistic radical denunciations of the LSSP and was one of the far-sighted Tamil workers and youth who were drawn to the RCL. Founded in 1968, the RCL traced the LSSP's betrayal to its drawn-out degeneration following its rejection of the ICFI's struggle against an opportunist tendency headed by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel.

Sarawanaperumal worked at a radio repair shop in the early 1970s. There he came across the RCL's Tamil language newspaper, *Tholilalar Pathai* (Workers Path), and finally became a party member in 1975. When asked why he joined the RCL, he would explain that he was attracted in particular by two things: the struggle against Tamil communalism and, as a student of science, the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism.

In addition to his work as a radio repairer, Sarawanaperumal used to labour in his family's paddy fields at Paranthan, about 40 kilometres south of Jaffna. Although his parents initially opposed his decision to join the RCL, they later began to appreciate the party's program and to respect their son's participation. In the course of his work in Paranthan, he built up a local party branch.

In 1977, Sarawanaperumal began to work at Ceynor at Karainagar as an electrician. The factory, which produced fishing nets and fiberglass boats, was a significant employer in northern Sri Lanka. The RCL and its *Tholilalar Pathai* became well known among Ceynor workers who looked to Sarawanaperumal and other RCL members for leadership in the defence of jobs and conditions.

The same year marked a significant shift in the political situation. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)—an alliance of Tamil parties—was formed and fought the 1977 general election on the basis of seeking a mandate for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island. Various youth groups, including one that evolved into the LTTE, were

active in its ranks.

The RCL had the twin political tasks of combatting both Sinhala chauvinism and Tamil communalism. During 1977, Sarawanaperumal and other RCL members organised a vigorous campaign in opposition to the TULF perspective. The party stood a candidate for the seat of Vaddukkodai based on the call for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers on a socialist perspective. On several occasions, Sarawanaperumal narrowly escaped being beaten up by TULF thugs.

In the south, the RCL fought against the reactionary policies of the United National Party (UNP). Having defeated the Bandaranaike government, President J.R. Jayawardene was among the first leaders in the world to actively promote the policies of free market restructuring. To divert growing hostility and discontent, he deliberately whipped up anti-Tamil chauvinism—a path that led directly to the outbreak of civil war in 1983.

In the midst of his hectic political work, Sarawanaperumal was married in June 1978. His wife Saraswathie did not become a party member but was always very supportive of Sarawanaperumal and the RCL. She explained to others: “This is a party of honest men. It provides a clear analysis of what is going to happen.” Their house was always open to party members.

Civil war

The experiences of Sarawanaperumal and Saraswathie were those of many Tamils in the war-torn north. They were regarded as the “enemy” by the Sri Lankan armed forces. The RCL opposed the political perspective of the LTTE but at the same time condemned the war as a racist war to defend anti-Tamil discrimination. The party demanded the immediate unconditional withdrawal of the military from the north and east. As a result, RCL members faced threats and intimidation from both the LTTE and the army.

In July 1987, the Indian and Sri Lankan governments signed the Indo-Lanka Accord, which was meant to provide the basis for a political settlement to the war. The deal provided for Indian military “peacekeepers” to enter the north and east of the country. The RCL was the only party to oppose the Accord from the standpoint of the working class. It warned that the agreement was aimed at suppressing the struggles of working people, both Tamil and Sinhala.

While the LTTE backed the Accord, the RCL actively campaigned against it and called for workers to fight for their own class solution to the war. The party held a series of public meetings in August 1987 in Jaffna to advance its perspective for a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic as part of the United Socialist States of the Indian Sub-continent. Sarawanaperumal chaired the main meeting at the Nallur Cultural Hall in Jaffna which was prominently reported in local Tamil newspapers.

Just two months later, the RCL’s analysis tragically proved to be correct. The Indian military launched a savage offensive against the LTTE in which thousands of people were killed. The presence of Indian forces in the north and east freed the Sri Lankan military to be unleashed against the Sinhala masses in the south. Using the JVP’s violent chauvinist campaign against the Accord as the pretext, the UNP government seized the opportunity to launch a vicious campaign of repression in 1989 against impoverished rural youth that claimed an estimated 60,000 lives.

The Accord collapsed, the Indian army withdrew in 1990 and the country descended back to civil war. The military occupied Ceynor’s Karainagar premises, which still remain under the control of the navy. Almost all of the houses in Karainagar, including Sarawanaperumal’s home, were destroyed in the fighting. Sarawanaperumal’s uncle and aunt, who lived next door, were burnt to death in one of the attacks. Shrubs and undergrowth now cover the area.

Despite these difficult circumstances, Sarawanaperumal and S. Chandrasekeran, who also worked at Ceynor, waged an important

political struggle to defend jobs. In 1991, after slashing the workforce from 800 to just 100, Ceynor management announced the closure of the company throughout the Jaffna peninsula, including its remaining active branch at Gurunagar. The Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union (CMU) and the Ceylon Engineering Workers Union supported the government’s plan and its “voluntary” retirement scheme.

Sarawanaperumal and Chandrasekeran, who both held positions in the Ceynor CMU branch, opposed the plan along with 24 other workers. Their campaign involved a struggle not only against the management but the CMU bureaucracy led by Bala Tampoe. Tampoe, a former LSSP leader, opposed the LSSP’s betrayal in 1964, but failed to examine its deeper political roots. He covered up his own opportunist politics with militant rhetoric and denunciations of anyone, particularly genuine socialists, who wanted political debate in the union.

A delegation from Ceynor organised by Sarawanaperumal and Chandrasekeran travelled to Colombo to confront the CMU leadership and demand the union defend their jobs. It was a bitter lesson for those workers. The CMU leadership not only refused to fight for jobs, but also collaborated in a deal aimed at undermining the ongoing struggle. Unable to sack the 26 workers, the management kept them in limbo on half pay, with the blessing of the CMU leaders.

Chandrika Kumaratunga won the presidential elections in 1994 promising peace. But after talks with the LTTE broke down in 1995, Kumaratunga’s Peoples Alliance (PA) government intensified the war. In the midst of a massive military offensive, Sarawanaperumal and other RCL members were compelled to flee from Jaffna, along with tens of thousands of others. He and his family lived as refugees in difficult conditions in several places, including Paranthan and Kilinochchi, before returning to Jaffna in 1998.

In July 1998, the LTTE arrested four SEP members in Kilinochchi, a town under its control, for campaigning for the party’s socialist perspective. Sarawanaperumal escaped arrest only because he was in government-controlled Vavuniya, about 70 kilometres to the south, seeking treatment at the town’s hospital. He was outraged by the news of the detentions and took an active part in the international campaign waged by the SEP and *World Socialist Web Site* that finally secured the release of the SEP members in September 1998.

In 1999, amid ongoing agitation for jobs and the reopening of Ceynor, the government decided to restart the company’s branch at Gurunagar. Sarawanaperumal was the first man to be rehired in 2000. As an electrician, he was needed to repair machinery. Because of the campaign that the RCL had waged, he was elected as CMU branch secretary and remained in that post until his death.

Sarawanaperumal was not only renowned on the Jaffna peninsula for his political courage, but also for his skills as an electrician. In the early 1990s, he was called to repair vital electrical equipment on a foreign ship berthed in the southern port of Galle. He was awarded the grade of Instrument Electrician. It was through his knowledge and abilities that the machinery at the Ceynor plant was brought back to life.

Sarawanaperumal lived simply and was known for his generosity. Socialist Equality Party members recalled that, after drawing his monthly salary, he always gave money on his way home to people he knew were living in poverty. As his home was destroyed at Karainagar, he and his family lived in a rented house in Jaffna.

Last October Sarawanaperumal travelled with other SEP members from Jaffna to attend public meetings addressed by Bill Van Auken, the US presidential candidate of the SEP’s sister party. The meetings made a big impression on Sarawanaperumal, who enthusiastically explained to other comrades that the lecture had helped him understand the political situation in the US and the common problems facing American and Sri Lankan workers.

At the last SEP branch meeting, which he attended in February,

Sarawanaperumal delivered a report on the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement in 1971 that marked the beginning of the breakup of postwar arrangements and the emergence of the US militarism. He did not usually make lengthy contributions in party meetings but he always sought to patiently educate newer members and supporters based on his firm grasp of political principle. He will be missed by party members as well as by the wide circle of family, friends and fellow workers on which he had a profound influence.

The SEP pays tribute to this courageous fighter for Trotskyism whose life forms an essential part of the party's heritage.

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