

Sri Lankan SEP member Mohamdiramlage Chandrasiri (1955–2018)

By Wimal Fernando
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Mohamdiramlage Chandrasiri, a longtime member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of International Committee of the Fourth International Committee, died on June 21, aged 63. His funeral, which was held at the Thalagolla public cemetery in Ragama, 30 kilometres from Colombo, was attended by about 200 people. Those paying their last respects to this selfless and principled fighter for the working class included his relatives, bank workers and a large number of SEP members.

Chandrasiri, who suffered from several health problems, including a heart condition, was living alone in a rented annex room at Ragama when he tragically passed away on June 21. He was found in his room the following day. A post-mortem conducted by the judicial medical officer at Ragama teaching hospital confirmed that he had died of a heart attack.

Chandrasiri was born to a fairly wealthy family in Chilaw in Sri Lanka's north-western province and attended St Mary's college, the main Catholic school in the city. He was the eldest child and had a brother and five sisters.

As a school student Chandrasiri was attracted to the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, and expressed his interest in learning about socialism. He attended the RCL's public meetings and regularly read the *Kamkaru Mawatha*, the party's weekly newspaper. The RCL had a branch in Chilaw and won broad support from workers, fishermen and youth, including students.

This was a period of sharp battles by the working class against the second bourgeois coalition government of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Stalinist Communist Party (CP).

The coalition government came to power in 1970,

and confronted a mass strike by thousands of bank employees in 1972. The 108-day walkout was crushed by the government, which banned the industrial action and sacked all the strikers. Confronted with sharp increases in world oil prices and a global recession, the Sri Lankan government unleashed major attacks on the living conditions and social rights of the working class and the rural masses.

The RCL intervened in all the major struggles of working people that erupted between 1974 and 1976, intensifying its political campaign to demand that the LSSP and CP break from the government and fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies. This tactical demand was aimed at exposing the reformist policies of the LSSP and the Stalinists and winning class conscious workers to the RCL.

Determined industrial action by workers deepened divisions within the government and the LSSP was forced out of the coalition in September 1975. Increasingly militant action by workers culminated in a general strike in 1976 and ultimately forced the government to call parliamentary elections.

The United National Party (UNP), led by J. R. Jayawardene, won the elections by exploiting the disillusionment of sections of the middle class with the betrayals of the LSSP and the CP. In line with the demands of international finance capital, the right-wing regime immediately introduced "free market" economic policies. At the same time, the Jayawardene government mounted a series of communal provocations against the Tamil minority in order to divide the working class. This culminated in 1983 with its communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Chandrasiri, who had begun working at the Bank of

Ceylon in 1974, aged 18, contacted RCL members and joined the party. In 1978, after UNP goons violently attacked a picket organised by the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU), he took the initiative and fought for the party's political perspective among bank workers. As always, the CBEU bureaucracy told its members not to bring politics into their struggles and called for non-confrontational bargaining with management.

The RCL's and Chandrasiri's political work was not restricted to bank employees but saw bold interventions into other industries and working-class neighbourhoods, fighting to win new members to the party.

It was a difficult political period, however, for the Sri Lankan working class as a whole. In 1980, the UNP government defeated a public-sector general strike and sacked nearly 100,000 employees.

The UNP's ability to carry this out was a product of the betrayals of the LSSP, the CP, the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the trade unions, which politically disarmed the working class. These organisations opposed the fight to build a socialist movement of the working class that would lead the oppressed masses and youth in a struggle against the government. Instead, they insisted that large protests would pressure Colombo to grant workers' demands.

The defeat of the strike and the government's offensive pushed the working class back, and in the mid-1980s, Chandrasiri withdrew from active participation in the party's political work. His unstable health, including heart problems that eventually led to bypass surgery in 2000, was also a contributing factor.

Chandrasiri, however, never broke relations with the party, regularly contributing financially and endorsing its struggles within the union. In 2004, he re-joined the movement.

Chandrasiri, who wrote several articles for the Sinhala section of the *World Socialist Web Site*, played an important role collecting information for articles written by other comrades. He distributed WSWS material among workers and enthusiastically discussed the analysis with them.

Chandrasiri was also recently involved in the independent workers' inquiry committee established by the Socialist Equality Party to investigate last year's Meethotamulla garbage dump disaster.

Located in Colombo suburbs, the Meethotamulla garbage mountain collapsed in April 2017 killing at least 32 people, injuring hundreds and displacing more than 1,000 residents. This social crime was the responsibility of successive Sri Lankan governments, including the current administration of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Against the ongoing efforts of the government and the capitalist media to hide the truth, the independent inquiry committee systematically revealed the political and economic factors that produced the disaster.

Along with other comrades, Chandrasiri wholeheartedly involved himself in the committee's work, distributing leaflets, speaking with local residents and helping to organise meetings. To assist in political clarification, he would always ask questions during discussion times at SEP lectures and public meetings. He also maintained a lively interest in cinema and theatre, often speaking with SEP comrades about these art forms.

Devoted to his ailing mother, Chandrasiri decided to retire from fulltime employment in December 2010, at the age of 55, in order to assist her.

At Chandrasiri's funeral his siblings praised his generous and self-sacrificing contribution towards the well-being of his extended family. His bank co-workers described Chandrasiri as a thoroughly principled man and one who fought for his convictions. He will always be remembered by his comrades for his selfless dedication to Trotskyism, the rights of working class and the building of the Socialist Equality Party.

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