

A Tribute to Upali Cooray (1939-2009)

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Upali Cooray, a Sri Lankan Trotskyist and tireless social activist, died in London on August 21, 2009. He had just recovered from a dangerous Streptococcus Pneumonia infection but started to have difficulty breathing and was taken to the hospital on August 20. He died the next morning. He was cremated after a funeral service in London on September 3. His coffin was draped with a red flag bearing the hammer and sickle emblem.

Born in Sri Lanka in 1939, Upali joined the Youth League of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) while still a student. After completing his education he taught at Karadeniya Central School in Galle. In those days the LSSP was a mass-based Trotskyist party which fought hard against the anti-Tamil policies that were being fostered by the MEP coalition government, which had been swept into power in 1956 on the rising tide of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

Within a few years, however, the LSSP tired of swimming against the tide, and in 1964 a majority of the party voted to seek a coalition government with Mrs. Bandaranaike at the head. Upali supported the revolutionary Trotskyist faction of the LSSP, led by Edmund Samarakkody, Bala Tampoe, V. Karalasingham, and Meryl Fernando, which split and formed the LSSP (Revolutionary). Upali was elected to the central committee of the new party. But this group proved to be unstable, due to political differences, not to mention personal rivalries, among the leaders. The LSSP (Revolutionary) soon splintered.

Upali emigrated to Britain, entered the London School of Economics, and joined the International Marxist Group (IMG), the British Section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. He became secretary of Vietnam Solidarity Campaign. He eventually earned a BSc in Economics and LLB from the London University and MA in Business Law at London Guildhall University. He was called to the bar at Middle Temple in 1974.

In 1971 the radical Sinhalese JVP staged an ill-starred uprising against the coalition government. The LSSP and Communists supported the vicious police repression of the youth. Upali went on an international tour to campaign for the release of 80,000 political prisoners held in detention in the aftermath of the failed JVP insurrection of April 1971. He was arrested and detained by the police in Sri Lanka in 1972 for these activities.

In 1975 Upali returned to Sri Lanka and joined the Revolutionary

Marxist Party, the Sri Lankan section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International, which was led by Bala Tampoe. He worked closely with leading activists of Tampoe's Ceylon Mercantile Union. In Colombo he established a legal practice but devoted his services solely to trade unions and workers.

Faced with the rising tide of Sinhalese chauvinism, Upali defended the principle of self-determination for the Tamil minority in the North and East of the island. In July 1979 he was a founding member of the Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE). He co-authored the first MIRJE publication, *Emergency '79*, which was the first publication to expose the atrocities in Jaffna that began on the first night of the Emergency rule.

In 1983, during the "Black July" pogrom against the Tamil people in the south, he courageously protected individual Tamils from attacks by Sinhalese thugs. When the Jayawardena government enacted repressive laws to crush the Tamil separatist movement and the trade unions, Upali actively defended the rights of the Tamil people and workers' rights. He always fought the cases that others would not touch. He was known for defending the rights of workers, the poor, and the victimized in immigration, employment, criminal, housing, and family cases.

Upali also was an ardent champion of equal rights for women. He initiated alternative institutions to organise and educate women workers in the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone. He set up a Women's Centre and a Legal Advice Centre and helped to publish 'Da Bindu' and 'Nirman' to raise awareness of women's issues. He set up a Resource Centre in Balangoda as a meeting place for tea plantation workers. For these activities he was jailed for six months. He also initiated Janahanda and Venasa, Sinhala language newspapers to counter capitalist media, war mongering and anti-Tamil propaganda in the Sinhala media. He wrote a series of booklets to explain legal jargon in simple language for the benefit of worker activists.

In the late 1980s Upali returned to Britain, where he continued to campaign against disappearances and assassinations during the reign of terror in Sri Lanka. In 1988 he formed the Committee for Democracy and Justice in Sri Lanka. He opposed both state-sponsored violence and the terrorism of the Liberation Tigers.

Upali looked for ways to build bridges to the splintered and marginalized remnants of the Old Left in Sri Lanka. He renewed his contacts with old comrades, including Edmund Samarakkody, Hector Abhayavardhana, Osmund Jayaratne, Prins Rajasooriya, and N. Sanmugathan. Upali thought the Left in Sri Lanka had reached a dead end and had to return to its roots. In an open letter to his grandson he wrote: *"we must build a new and a bold movement that could unite all those who have been exploited, disadvantaged and marginalized. Like the Suriya Mal Movement and the LSSP, which spearheaded the fight against caste oppression and British imperialism in the 1930's, today*

we need a new movement to spearhead the struggle for modernity and to drag our country from the economic and political quagmire that the failed prophets of the yester years have led us into. Unfortunately, the LSSP lost its clout and its mass base by entering into an opportunist alliance with the SLFP. We must learn the lessons of that debacle and make sure that the poor and the oppressed will always maintain its political and organizational independence."

P.S.

* From <http://new-wave-nw.blogspot.com/2009/06/tribute-to-upali-cooray-1939-2009.html>