

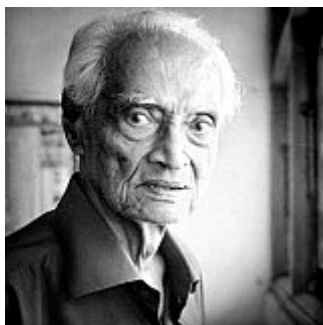
Sri Lanka: Comrade Bala Tampoe (1922-2014) - Trade Union Firebrand

Tuesday 2 September 2014, by [JEYARAJ David Buell Sabapathy](#) (Date first published: 31 May 2014).

Being General Secretary of the CMU for 66 years since 1948 is a marvellous achievement and record - all the more so because of his ethnicity in Sri Lanka's deeply divided society. Bala Tampoe is of Jaffna Tamil origin. The membership of the CMU though multi-ethnic is predominantly Sinhala.

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May 23 was the 92nd birthday of Sri Lanka's unique trade union leader Philips Balendra Tampoe known generally as Bala Tampoe. Bala or comrade Bala as he was popularly called has been at the helm of the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) as its General Secretary since 1948. Though called the CMU still, the amended name of the union is now The Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers' Union.

CMU staffers and members of the union's executive committee were preparing for a celebration in honour of their nonagenarian General Secretary at the trade union office down 22nd Lane Kollupitiya when President Mahinda Rajapaksa made an unannounced entry with a birthday cake. Earlier Mr. Mahinda Madihahewa, Co-Chief Executive Officer to the Secretariat for Senior Ministers, had visited the premises and informed Bala Tampoe that the President wanted to visit him at the CMU office. The "Birthday Boy" however told Madihahewa that while the President - a former CMU member - was most welcome to visit the office, he did not want the trade union premises to be invaded by media or security personnel. So when Mahinda Rajapaksa walked into the CMU

headquarters to felicitate Bala Tampoe, he was only accompanied by Mahinda Madihahewa. The 'in-house' birthday party turned out to be a pleasant occasion.

President Rajapaksa being keen to attend the CMU event celebrating Bala Tampoe was quite understandable. Prior to becoming Member of Parliament for Beliatta in 1970 Mahinda had worked as an assistant librarian at the Sri Jayewardenepura University. He was reportedly a member of the CMU then. Later as Labour minister in the Chandrika Kumaratunga cabinet, Mahinda had worked closely with Bala to draft the comprehensive Workers' Charter which sadly is yet to see the light of day. Mahinda Rajapaksa who was once regarded as a progressive politician with leftist leanings has made it a point to maintain rapport with the CMU in general and Bala Tampoe in particular.

This is hardly surprising because in whatever that is left of the "old" Left in Sri Lanka today, veteran Bala Tampoe is arguably the most vibrant icon. What is most remarkable about him is his active longevity. Not only does Bala Tampoe remain positively healthy at 92 but also leads a productively busy working life as a firebrand trade unionist.

JAFFNA TAMIL

Being General Secretary of the CMU for 66 years since 1948 is a marvellous achievement and record - all the more so because of his ethnicity in Sri Lanka's deeply divided society. Bala Tampoe is of Jaffna Tamil origin. The membership of the CMU though multi-ethnic is predominantly Sinhala. This fact has been highlighted often by many observers of the Sri Lanka's political scene. It is however noteworthy that Bala has never projected himself as an 'ethnic Tamil' or engaged in communal politics.

"What is most remarkable about him is his active longevity. Not only does Bala Tampoe remain positively healthy at 92 but also leads a productively busy working life as a firebrand trade unionist"

Philips Balendra Tampoe is an incomparable Sri Lankan phenomenon! Underground member of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) during the Second World War days, Agricultural Dept. lecturer who lost his job due to involvement in a general strike, leader of the same trade union for more than six decades, fiery orator known for defiant speeches, last living witness of the independence ceremony of Ceylon when the Union Jack was replaced, key organiser of the historic 1953 "hartal", one time Central Committee and Politbureau member of the largest Trotskyite party recognised by the Fourth International, architect of many strikes including one which paralysed the Colombo harbour causing declaration of emergency, one of the trouble-making Leftists earmarked for incarceration at the Naval armoury by the 1962 coup d'état planners, pioneer of collective agreement that proved to be a model for many such agreements, trade union leader who ushered in the payment of the allowance scheme based on the rise in the cost-of-living index, man behind a series of strikes leading to progressive measures regarding termination of employment, co-leader of revolutionary breakaway group in the LSSP that formed its own party, unsuccessful candidate in three parliamentary polls; lawyer who defended JVP comrades free of charge after the 1971 insurgency, dedicated trade unionist who drives to office and back for six days of work at the age of 92 - these are but a few facets of comrade Bala Tampoe.

Bala Tampoe has been one of those formidable figures who have fascinated me since childhood. I first heard of Bala Tampoe as a six-year-old boy in 1960 which was a watershed year to me. There were two parliamentary elections that year in March and July. My father was then in Govt service working as a Labour officer. He went outstation for both elections as a presiding officer in a polling booth. This fact and the enormous quantity of political propaganda unleashed during the successive

election campaigns impacted greatly upon an impressionable six-year-old. Though I certainly could not understand what politics or elections were all about, the reality of experiencing election campaigns aroused much excitement. My abiding interest in politics had its beginnings in 1960.

HULFTSDORP

We were then living in Hulftsdorp which came under the Colombo Central electorate. PB Tampoe or Bala Tampoe contested Colombo Central in both elections as a Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) candidate under the key symbol. It was during the election campaign that I first heard of Bala Tampoe whose name was in wide circulation in the Colombo Central constituency. My father would take me along for meetings conducted by the LSSP. He had been an ardent supporter of the LSSP from his schooldays. I was regaled during childhood with tales related by him of events like the “Suriya Mal” movement, the Bracegirdle Affair, the Bogambara Prison escape by LSSP stalwarts in 1942, the 1953 Hartal etc.

In 1960 March my father and most LSSP supporters anticipated an LSSP triumph and NM Perera becoming Prime Minister. The LSSP that contested 101 seats got only 10 in March.

I remember my dejected father lamenting for many years, the fact that not even a single seat was won by the LSSP in the Tamil areas whereas the party lost out in the Sinhala areas due to its commendable language policy aiming at parity of status for Sinhala and Tamil. I also remember the frustration he and numerous others experienced when the LSSP joined the SLFP Govt in 1964. Thereafter he supported the breakaway LSSP revolutionary group led by Edmund Samarakody and Bala Tampoe. After Edmund and Bala split, my father lost all interest in the LSSP and drifted away. Ultimately he ended up supporting the UNP in Kurunegala due to personal friendship with some leading Wayamba politicians.

Given my father’s support for the LSSP it was but natural for him to attend pro-LSSP meetings in 1960. Since Bala Tampoe was the Colombo Central candidate I saw much of him at election meetings. There were posters and leaflets all over the area. Bala Tampoe with his fire and brimstone speeches made an indelible impression on me even though I could not comprehend all that he was saying. I also remember that his son Dhiresh was at St. Thomas’ Prep School in Colpetty. He was a few classes above me. Fellow students including myself would stare intently at the boy who was Bala Tampoe’s son.

COLOMBO CENTRAL

One of the things I recall about 1960 is the fact that people expected Bala Tampoe to definitely become an MP as Colombo Central had three members. Not only my father but many of his friends who were supporters of other parties also thought Bala Tampoe would win. In March 1960 when the LSSP was expected to romp home as winners, Bala was a favourite in Colombo Central. Yet it was Dr. MCM Kaleel and Ranasinghe Premadasa of the UNP along with the Communist party’s Pieter Keuneman who won. Bala Tampoe came fourth out of fifteen candidates polling 22,228 votes.

In July 1960 the number of candidates had dwindled to six. For some reason the expectation again was that Bala Tampoe would become the first MP. But again that was not to be. Sir Razeek Fareed from the SLFP came first with Pieter Keuneman and Dr. Kaleel coming second and third. Bala Tampoe came fifth behind Premadasa. His vote tally had shrunk to 16,406.

“He was in full command of his faculties. His mind was razor sharp as usual. The flow of

ideas and words gushed forth as in the past. The familiar gritting of teeth frequently occurred. The fiery glint in his eyes was very visible at close quarters. His memory was fantastic"

The LSSP underwent a crisis when the party leadership opted to form a coalition govt with the SLFP led by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. 14 members of the then LSSP central committee dissented. These included Bulathsinhala MP Edmund Samarakkody, Moratuwa MP Meryl Fernando, theoretician V. Karalasingham and Bala Tampoe. The dissident group formed the LSSP-R or LSSP-Revolutionary party minus the Karlo group of Karalasingham that rejoined the parent body. The mainstream LSSP was expelled from the Fourth International and the LSSP-R was recognised in its place as the Ceylon section of the Fourth International.

The LSSP-R contested the 1965 parliamentary elections but did not fare well. Bala Tampoe contested in Colombo Central again but this time under the lamp and not the key symbol. He came fifth out of ten candidates polling only 4,559 votes. The LSSP-R underwent further fragmentation when Edmund Samarakkody left the LSSP -R after engaging in a vitriolic campaign against Bala Tampoe. The Edmund faction formed the Revolutionary Samasamajist Party. Later on it became the Revolutionary Workers' party.

FOURTH INTERNATIONAL

The LSSP-R continued to be under the sway of Bala Tampoe. The CMU was its mainstay. The LSSP-R did not contest the 1970 General Elections and accused the LSSP and the Communist Party of "misleading the masses". The party too was renamed as the Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP) and continued to be recognised as the Ceylon/Sri Lanka affiliate of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International.

In 1977 Bala Tampoe reversed the earlier position of not contesting Parliamentary polls and fielded a few candidates at the July hustings. Bala Tampoe himself did not contest. The CMU and RMP together put forward four candidates on a "revolutionary socialist platform" calling for "the overthrow of capitalist rule and the establishment of a Workers' and Peasants' Government by the masses".

Upali Cooray and TN Perera contested on behalf of the RMP in Dehiwela and Kesbewa while Vernon Wijesinghe and HA Seneviratne were put forward by the CMU in Colombo North and Kelaniya. All four fought in the election campaign under the bell symbol. The results were a disaster. The four candidates got 402,298,193 and 162 in Dehiwela, Kesbewa, Colombo North and Kelaniya respectively.

The failure of the Parliamentary path and the personal electoral defeats of Bala Tampoe in 1960 and 1965 were blessings in disguise for trade unionism in general and the CMU in particular. Bala Tampoe organised a series of more than 70 strikes across the country protesting the way employers could summarily dismiss workers. This led to the then Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake meeting with him to discuss ways and means of addressing the issue. Bala Tampoe proposed that the State should step in and examine grounds for removal. Tampoe submitted a legal draft which laid the foundation for the Termination of Employment Act that was enacted in 1971.

The larger than life image of Bala Tampoe in my perspective kept growing as I too grew up. Many relatives and friends in the private sector were CMU members and the stories they told about Tampoe enhanced his image further in my eyes. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna led insurgency of 1971 captured the imagination of youths in the seventies. Bala Tampoe aided by a team of dedicated

lawyers appeared for many of the accused at the Criminal Justice Commission. Even as I lapped up newspaper reports of the proceedings eagerly, my esteem for Bala Tampoe increased.

LEAD STORY

I began interacting with him as a journalist when I worked at “The Island”. When I first joined the newspaper in November 1981 I used to cover the Trade Union and Customs as my regular beat. I had just moved out of Tamil Journalism at the “Virakesari”. Likewise my friend Prasad Gunewardena had moved out of Sinhala journalism at the “Dawasa” and joined “The Island”. My first lead story at “The Island” was a combined effort with Prasad. I had obtained interviews with MS Sellasamy of the Ceylon Workers Congress and Bala Tampoe of the CMU. Prasad had a few interviews with some other trade unionists. The then news editor Gamini Weerakoon blended them together and made it the lead.

The first lead story to a reporter lingers in memory like that of the first kiss. Thus Bala lingers in memories of my lead story. However I was soon put on the Tamil political round at “The Island”. With the ethnic crisis escalating the “Tamil round” assumed crucial importance.

I found myself writing many news stories and articles and even a weekly column pertaining to the ethnic problem. The trade union beat was taken off. My interaction with Bala Tampoe ceased. In 1988 I left the shores of Sri Lanka.

Bala Tampoe reached the ninety-year milepost in 2012. I wanted to write a personality profile about him then and started collecting information. The idea did not materialise as I could not get enough material from here in Canada about his personal background. Some of the people I spoke to were so overawed by him that they knew very little of his family details. I abandoned the project in 2012.

The year 2013 was a blessed year for me as I got the opportunity of returning to Sri Lanka after 25 years. After travelling about and visiting relatives and close friends I began meeting “other” people during the latter stages of my stay in Sri Lanka. One such person was Bala Tampoe.

I went to the CMU headquarters in Kollupitiya one morning after a friend had secured an appointment to meet Bala Tampoe. The CMU office that buzzed vibrantly with activity at one time seemed relatively quiet now. It seemed to have lost its lustre just like trade unionism in the country.

NONAGENARIAN

When I walked into the hall and saw Bala from afar, the nonagenarian seemed to look the same despite the withering gaze of age. When I got closer I could see the toll of nine decades. Yet he was quite sprightly in his walk and had a firm handshake as usual. The physical movements were somewhat slower but unimpaired. His hair remained still with a silvery grey hue.

When I sat down to converse I discovered that the fire in the doughty fighter for workers’ rights was still ablaze. He was in full command of his faculties. His mind was razor sharp as usual. The flow of ideas and words gushed forth as in the past. The familiar gritting of teeth frequently occurred. The fiery glint in his eyes was very visible at close quarters. His memory was fantastic.

Unfortunately for me, both Bala and his chief-of-staff Sylvester Jayakody the CMU Deputy General Secretary had to go to Katunayake in connection with an on going strike at the export processing zone. The CMU had nothing to do with the strike but Bala’s services were urgently required in an

advisory capacity to help resolve the dispute. The issue had cropped up suddenly and Bala had tried to re-schedule his appointment with me but I had started out from home already and nothing could be done.

Since I was leaving Sri Lanka within a few days another meeting could not be arranged. Still, Bala was gracious enough to spend nearly two hours talking to me where he spoke of many, many things. It was while conversing with Bala that I realised what a treasure trove of information the trade union veteran was. From DS Senanayake to Chandrika Kumaratunga he had seen many rulers “come and go” but Bala Tampoe like Tennyson’s brook has been going “on forever”.

It was in this context that I decided to write a detailed article about Bala Tampoe and his background on the occasion of his 92nd birthday. I contacted some erstwhile comrades and acquaintances of the veteran trade union leader and compiled facts. I also got in touch with Bala Tampoe by email and sought more information on some matters. He obliged promptly with precise and concise answers. It is with the aid of all this information that I have embarked upon this mission of writing about Bala Tampoe.

VOLKSWAGON

Bala Tampoe lives in Ratmalana. The CMU office is in Kollupitiya. Each day he drives from home to work and work to home. Bala drives a vintage Volkswagon that he has been using for decades. He works six days a week and at times seven, depending upon necessity. His workday is around 7 to 8 hours daily.

I asked Bala Tampoe how he managed to lead such a busy, strenuous life at his age. What is the secret of his long life, good health, and youthful energy? He replied pensively-

“I think there are genetic as well as other reasons for my having lived thus far, with the capacity to drive to work and back between my house in Ratmalana and the CMU headquarters in Colpetty, five to six days a week, for a full day’s work. One is that I cannot let go of the needs of the Union and its members. Another is that I have been fairly frugal in my diet, and have never been given to excesses in anything but my activities on behalf of others. I also can’t yet bring myself to think of myself as old, as I remain young at heart and in mind”.

Bala adds as an afterthought. “An eye specialist recently observed that I did not seem to have the optic nerve of a ninety-one year old, when she happened to examine one of my eyes! That signifies something that I can’t explain about my physical condition”.

I was curious about his lifestyle and daily routine. I asked Bala Tampoe to describe a day in his life. For him a “day in his life” equals a working day. This was his response-

DAILY ROUTINE

“I usually wake to the sounds of early birds chirping outside my bedroom window, between 5.15 and 6 a.m. I then make myself a cup of tea, and sit down at my laptop, to check my email and respond thereto straightaway sometimes, or just browse a bit on the internet, before I prepare my breakfast”.

“It normally consists of cereals, mixed in a little milk with curd, a spoonful of kitul honey and a sliced kolikuttu plantain. I am giving you those details because people sometimes ask me about my daily diet, when questioning me about “my secret”, as you’ve done”.

"I normally leave for the CMU headquarters by 8.30 a.m., driving my old Volkswagen which I have had re-conditioned recently. The Union spends for its maintenance and costs of petrol for my daily travelling to and from the headquarters. I preferred that to the Union's purchasing a new car for me, as its General Council had wished. One of my reasons for that preference was that I am too advanced in years to need a car for much longer than I've driven the one I have!"

"Bala Tampoe organised a series of more than 70 strikes across the country protesting the way employers could summarily dismiss workers. This led to the then Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake meeting with him to discuss ways and means of addressing the issue"

"My working day now normally ends by 5 p.m. but continues till 8.00 or even 9.00 p.m. on Wednesdays, when the Executive Committee or the Working Committee meet alternately, from week to week. It takes me about an hour to drive home to Ratmalana".

"I have a short nap in the afternoons at the headquarters but have found it desirable as age creeps upon me, to have a longer nap when I get home, before warming my dinner (prepared for me at the headquarters) on a microwave oven".

"After dinner, I stretch my legs a bit, walking around the house for about fifteen minutes, before normally settling down to watch a DVD film till 11 p.m. or later, depending on how absorbing it is and how tired I may be at end of the day - and so it ends!

Bala Tampoe lives alone. He was married twice and has two children both of whom are in the USA. I asked Bala about his first wife and children about whom very little is known to current colleagues and contemporaries.

"My first wife was Nancy Kotalawela from Passara. She was a Montessori teacher who had been trained by Madame Maria Montessori herself in Kodaikanal, India. I married her on 28 October 1950. Our son Dhiresh was born on 1 December 1951 and our daughter Shyama was born on 6 January 1956. We separated in 1957, and were divorced in April 1966. Nancy left for the United States in September 1967, taking our two children with her, and kept them out of touch with me for more than thirty years in the States".

MAY WICKRAMASURIYA

Bala Tampoe's second wife was May Wickramasuriya who was an institution by herself. They were married on 22 September 1966. May worked at the CMU for decades and was well-known in trade union and Trotskyite circles. She had joined the CMU in 1951 and remained an efficient colleague and loyal companion to Bala Tampoe. She became assistant secretary of the CMU in 1956. May was paralysed after suffering a stroke in November 1995. She died a few years later on 15 December 1998. CMU contemporaries speak highly of the fond affection with which Bala cared for her. Bala describes her as his "companion and comrade". There is a conference room named after May at the CMU office.

Bala Tampoe though of Jaffna origin was not born in the North but in Negombo on May 23 1922. All his siblings were born in India where his father worked as an excise officer during British times. Bala was born here as his mother was then on holiday visiting her sister. Originally Bala was named Balendra Tampoe - Philips. Later it was changed to Philips Balendra Tampoe due to compelling reasons.

Philips Balendra Tampoe now known to all as Bala Tampoe is one whose name is indelibly etched in

the trade union annals of this country. How comrade Bala got drawn into the trade union movement, becoming General Secretary of the CMU and how he has steered it through significant ups and downs for sixty-six years is a saga that is worthy of vivid re-telling in a forthcoming article.

D. B. S. Jeyaraj

P.S.

* "Bala Tampoe - Trade Union Firebrand". DAILY MORROR. SATURDAY, 31 MAY 2014

01:45<http://www.dailymirror.lk/opinion/dbsjeyaraj-column/47821-comrade-bala-tampoe-trade-union-firebrand.html>