

Bala Tampoe: The Evergreen Nonagenarian Sama Samajist

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Bala Tampoe, the general secretary of the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), died on September 1, 2014. He led the union for sixty-seven years. A leading socialist and internationalist, he had led the Sri Lankan working class for a lifetime. His demise marks the end of an era. He joined Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) as a student and was a participant in every working class struggle that happened in the island-nation. He was sacked for his participation in the 1946 public sector workers strike. He transformed CMU from a white-collar staff union to a general union that included and led the manual workers and industrial workers. He led the 1953 general strike (Hartal), which rocked the nation and was the first major uprising since independence. In 1964, when LSSP decided to support the centrist-nationalist Sri Lanka Freedom Party government, he was the lone opposition in its Politbureau. An accomplished criminal lawyer, he defended the members of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna after the failed insurrection of 1971. He represented Sri Lankan workers at the International Labour Organization and actively organized them until a few days before his death. A committed socialist, he was one of the vibrant representatives of an era that symbolized a glorious working class struggle.

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