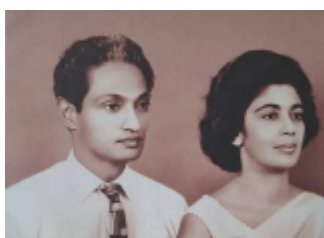


Sri Lanka. May Wickramasuriya: A struggle for the rights of working class women

Friday 10 January 2025, by [ARACHCHI Ishankha Singhe](#) (Date first published: 22 December 2024).



“She enjoyed the rare privilege of living a meaningful life through her dedication to organising the working class for the liberation of the working class and humanity,” remarked Dan Gallin, a prominent intellectual in the international trade union movement and a former President of the Global Labour Institute.

He expressed these sentiments while extending his condolences over the untimely passing of Comrade May Wickramasuriya, a pioneering female leader in the movement for trade union and women’s rights in Sri Lanka.

Serving the working class with unparalleled dedication for over four decades from 1953 to 1995, Comrade Wickramasuriya passed away on 13 December 1998 after battling a serious illness caused by an intracerebral hemorrhage for three years.

Born in Kurunegala in 1924, she was the daughter of Sri Lanka’s first Superintendent of Police in the Uva Province during British colonial rule. She received her education at Methodist College, Colombo.

After her father’s sudden passing, she assumed the responsibility of supporting her family, joining the Navy Administration Office in Colombo at the young age of 18. During World War II, she managed a team of 23 clerks with remarkable efficiency and poise.

Entering politics

Comrade Wickramasuriya later worked at Edward Reed & Begg, a private architectural firm. During this time, she became an active member of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), a powerful

Trotskyist party of the era.

She also co-edited the monthly magazine *Young Socialist* with Sydney Wanasinghe, which was published by the LSSP. She also joined the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), marking the start of her long and illustrious trade union career.

In 1953, Wickramasuriya was elected to the CMU Executive Committee. By 1955, she had decided to dedicate her life to the fight for workers' and women's rights, leaving her position as an assistant architect to become the union's Deputy Secretary.

She served the CMU full-time until her passing, becoming the union's Joint Secretary in 1980 and later its Senior Secretary, a role she held until her illness in 1995. Notably, she was the first woman to secure membership in both the CMU General Council and Executive Committee.

The May-Bala partnership

In 1966, Comrade Wickramasuriya married Bala Tampoe, the CMU's General Secretary. Despite her personal commitments, she remained steadfast in her dedication to trade union and Leftist politics. She was a rare woman who chose not to have children, believing that raising a family would limit her ability to pursue her passionate social and political activism.

The partnership between the two strengthened the CMU, enhancing its labour politics and fortifying it as an independent trade union.

"I developed a system for keeping files and records in order. I worked hard for the union. Even under the pressure of daily work, I was dedicated and never wasted time," she once said to a journalist. Her words serve as a lasting example for today's CMU members and other trade unionists.

Championing workers' rights

Alongside Jeanne Moonesinghe, the wife of LSSP politician Anil Moonesinghe, Wickramasuriya spearheaded workers' strikes and movements for trade union rights.

She was a true internationalist who fought against imperialism and advocated for women's rights, focusing especially on female workers in urban factories and plantations. She addressed critical issues such as the health and welfare of women in the workforce and led protests against the Government's decision to employ female workers in unsafe night shifts.

"I was often the only woman at our May Day demonstrations. I was also the first woman to negotiate directly with the Employers' Federation of Ceylon to resolve labour disputes," she once told a reporter.

Her thorough knowledge of labour laws, gained through diligent study of court records and legislation, allowed her to negotiate effectively with employers, so much so that lawyers representing companies often mistook her for a labour lawyer.

Advocacy for working-class women

Wickramasuriya's feminist activism extended to international forums, where she highlighted the economic role of Sri Lankan women. She invited feminist leaders to participate in the CMU's International Women's Day celebrations, held annually on 8 March, encouraging greater involvement from women within and outside the union.

She played a pivotal role in constructing the CMU's Headquarters, a fully equipped building that still stands as a testament to her organisational and architectural skills.

Legacy and remembrance

In honour of her immense contributions, the CMU General Assembly renamed its hall the May Wickramasuriya Memorial Hall in 1999, a year after her death.

"We will always remember her as a loyal comrade who stood by your side in every fight," wrote International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotels, Restaurants, Catering, Tobacco, and Allied Workers' Associations Asia-Pacific Regional Secretary Ma Wei Pin.

Comrade Wickramasuriya's life and work continue to inspire trade unionists, feminists, and social activists. Her unwavering dedication to justice and equality remains a beacon for all who strive to create a better world.

Ishankha Singhe Arachchi

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