

# 100<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY OF CAROLINE ANTHONY PILLAI THE LIONESSE OF BORALUGODA

Charles Wesley Ervin

On 8 October Caroline Anthony Pillai, the last living link to the early socialist movement in Sri Lanka, will turn 100. Caroline and her family have much to celebrate. She was a pioneer in many ways. Drawn into politics by her fiery elder brothers, Philip and Robert Gunawardena, she participated in the nascent Ceylonese nationalist movement of the early thirties and helped launch the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1935. During the Second World War, Caroline worked in an underground Trotskyist party in India along with her husband, S.C.C. Anthony Pillai. In 1947 she led a 100-day textile strike in Madras that became a landmark labor battle in India. After Independence, she and her husband remained in India to help build the left wing of the Socialist movement. With her support S.C.C. Anthony Pillai became a trade-union and parliamentary leader with national stature. It was only after he died in 2000 that Caroline finally returned to her native land. She lives with her family in Boralugoda, close to the ancestral home where she spent her happy childhood.



In 1915 commercial rivalry between Sinhalese Buddhist and Muslim merchants flared into communal violence. The British governor imposed martial law and rounded up suspected nationalists, including Caroline's father, who was accused of giving dynamite to rioters. Tried before a military tribunal, he was sentenced to death and jailed for seven months until he was released for lack of evidence. The ordeal

turned the Gunawardenas into resolute nationalists. Boralugoda Ralahamy pulled his sons out of the Prince of Wales College and sent them to Ananda, the Theosophist-Buddhist school for boys. Caroline and three of her sisters were sent to Musaeus College, the sister school for girls. After passing out of Musaeus, Caroline returned to Boralugoda and started teaching at the Siddhartha Vidyalaya.

Caroline was never one to bow to authority. Her niece, Vivienne Goonewardene (Goonetilleke), recalled how "Aunt Caro" taught her to be brave and defiant: "the young chaperone would induce the little children to run under the bellies of the elephants who

had been brought for their daily baths. This too she would insist the children do many times. Every time her mother came to know of this escapade, Caroline would receive a caning for her efforts in teaching the young to be courageous. Caning notwithstanding, the lessons would be repeated." (Pulsara Liyanage, *Vivi: A Biography of Vivienne Goonewardena*, 1998)

## Prelude to the Revolutionary Party

In the late twenties Caroline and her brothers, Harry and Robert, became active in nationalist youth groups which were demanding democratic reforms with the ultimate goal of complete independence. When the British announced that a State Council would be convened in 1931, Harry Gunawardena decided to contest the Avissawella

## Formative Years

Donna Caroline Rupasinghe Gunawardena was born on 8 October 1908 in rural Boralugoda in the Avissawella District. Her father, Don Jakolis Rupasinghe Gunawardena, was a prosperous landowner who served the British colonial government as the village ralahamy (headman) and vidanc arachchi (local police officer). The local folk deferentially called him "Boralugoda Ralahamy." He gave all his children English names: Harry, Philip, Benjamin (Robert), Sarah, Agnes, Sophia, Emily Angeline, Alice, and Caroline. Yet he also taught his children to be proud of their Sinhalese Buddhist heritage and culture. He schooled the children at the Boralugoda Temple and the Siddhartha Vidyalaya in nearby Kaluaggala.

consistency. Caroline and Robert went on the stump for their brother. In his memoirs Robert described how their campaign drove their opponent, a wealthy and powerful man, into frenzy. (*Daily Mirror*, 9 November 1971) Though Harry lost, Caroline found her calling. From that point on, she dedicated her life to winning freedom for Ceylon and social justice for all.

In late 1933 her brother Philip returned to Ceylon after a ten-year sojourn in the USA and England, where he had been an active member of the British Communist Party until he was expelled for supporting Trotsky against Stalin. Upon his return home, he converted Caroline and Robert to his revolutionary ideology. This was the nucleus of the revolutionary movement in Ceylon.

As part of the group around Philip, Caroline participated in the annual Suriya Mal campaigns, which were a form of protest against the official observation of Remembrance Day. Many Ceylonese and Indian soldiers had fought and died to help the British preserve their Empire in the First World War. Yet the Ceylonese veterans didn't get the same benefits as the British. Caroline and her comrades pushed the Suriya Mal activists to raise more overtly anti-imperialist slogans. As a result of their intervention, more young nationalists were won to their growing revolutionary group.

When an epidemic of malaria broke out in 1933-34, the Suriya Mal activists fanned out into the stricken villages to dispense food and medicine. Caroline played an important role. The Gunawardenas set up a dispensary in their house in Bambugoda. Caroline worked closely with her classmate from Musaeus, Selina Perera (Peiris), who had just returned from university in London. She too joined the group around the Gunawardenas.

### The LSSP

In 1935 the British government announced that elections for the Second State Council would be held in early 1936. The Suriya Mal workers decided that the time had come to launch a socialist party and field candidates for the State Council. Philip was without doubt the driving force behind the new party. Caroline attended the founding conference of the LSSP in December 1935. She was one of a handful of women who had the courage to defy convention and join a Red Party which boldly called for an "equal society" (*sama samaja*) cleansed of all racial, caste, class, and gender inequalities.

The new party promptly nominated four candidates to stand for the State Council. Philip contested the Avissawella constituency. Caroline trooked village to village, door to door, campaigning for Philip and their new party. He won by a strong majority of the votes. N.M. Perera also won in Ruwanwella. The two popular LSSP leaders used the chambers of the council to explain the message of Marxism to the people of the country and fight for reforms benefiting the working classes and village poor.

Caroline became a respected party leader in her own right. In 1937 the party selected her to be part of the LSSP delegation to the Faizpur session of the Indian National Congress.

### Romance, Marriage, and Strikes

In 1937-38 a number of talented Tamil youth joined the LSSP, including S.C.C. Anthony Pillai, who went by the nickname "Tony." The party leaders felt that he had the potential to become a trade-union leader. However, he couldn't speak Sinhalese, and that was a major handicap. And so Philip Gunawardena suggested that Tony get some instruction in Sinhala from his sister Caroline at Siddhartha Vidyalaya.

In many ways Caroline and Tony were worlds apart. He was cool and calculating, she was impetuous. He was a Tamil, she was Sinhalese. His parents were Christians, hers Buddhist. He was 24 years old, she was 30. Yet the two became close and fell in love. In 1939 Caroline and Tony married in a simple ceremony.

The newlyweds moved to Nawalapitiya, a hill town about 25 miles south of Kandy, surrounded by tea plantations, in order to organize the Tamil estate workers into an LSSP union. This was difficult and dangerous work. The British planters hired tough foremen to discipline the workers and keep out agitators. While living in Nawalapitiya, Caroline gave birth to their first son, Mahendran, and then their second, Ranjit Sen. While making speeches and organizing meetings, she also had to tend to the needs of her family.

The Second World War had just started in Europe. Following the Trotskyist line, the LSSP was vociferous in opposing the new "imperialist war." Unwilling to tolerate the pesky party any longer, the colonial government cracked down hard, arresting four LSSP leaders, including the two state councillors. More arrests followed. Despite the lightning vice

of repression, Tony and Caroline pressed ahead with their labor organizing. In 1940-41 they led a series of strikes by bus, harbor and granary workers. As her nephew, Vijith Gunawardena, recently told me, Caroline was “tough as nails – even tougher than Philip or Robert.”

### The Exodus to India

In April 1942 the LSSP underground workers carried out a perfectly planned rescue of their leaders from the Kandy jail. The jailbreak brought renewed repression. The above-ground cadres, including Caroline, were kept under close surveillance. Holed up in hideouts, the fugitive party leaders could do little. Meanwhile, the situation in India was heating up fast. Gandhi demanded that the British leave India or face a crippling mass civil-disobedience movement. Unable to do much in Ceylon at that point, the LSSP leaders decided to escape to India in order to give the impending mass movement the revolutionary leadership it would need to succeed. The LSSP had already helped organize a skeletal Trotskyist organization, the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), formed in May 1942.

In July 1942 about two dozen Ceylonese Trotskyists secretly crossed over to India in fishing boats. While most headed for Bombay, Tony went to Madurai. An anxious Caroline stayed behind with the two children. A month later the Quit India revolt erupted. The BLPI, new to the scene, threw its meager resources into the fight. In Madurai Tony and the handful of local BLPI members printed leaflets in support of the revolt.

After the Quit India revolt subsided, Tony sent a message to Caroline asking her to join him in Madras. The family was at last reunited. Yet the situation was trying, to say the least. The police were beating the bushes looking for the Trotskyists. Unable to speak Tamil fluently, Caroline couldn't easily blend in. Their living arrangements were risky too. She and Tony had to share their flat with several young party comrades. No matter how careful they were, all the comings and goings, and the late night meetings, must have had people talking.

### Return to Ceylon

In July 1943 the police raided the BLPI hideout in Bombay where Philip and Kusuma Gunawardena and another half dozen young comrades were staying. The other Ceylonese fugitives in Bombay escaped the raid in the nick of time and

fled to Madras. They took refuge with Caroline and Tony in a large, two-story house in Venus Colony in Teynampet. With the police hot on their trail, Caroline and Tony decided that it was best for her to take the children back to Ceylon.

After Caroline left, Tony moved to new place which he thought would be safer: a modest outhouse behind the famous Ambi's Café, opposite the Nampally Railway Station. Ironically, this move backfired. The neighborhood was populated by strict vegetarian Brahmins. And so the young comrades who were living with Tony went to another section of town for their non-vegetarian meals. Someone recognized them and informed the police, who trailed them back to their place and arrested everyone. Tony and another Ceylonese comrade were sentenced to two years' rigorous imprisonment at the Alipuram prison for “possessing seditious literature.”

### The High Point of Her Political Career

After his release from Alipuram, Tony returned home to Ceylon. But he and Caroline had little time to settle back into the political life of their country. The BLPI in Madras sent word that their work in the Buckingham and Carnatic Mills during the war had paid off. The president of the Madras Labour Union, the oldest and largest union in India, representing the mill workers, was willing to pass the mantle of leadership to Tony. That was an opportunity that couldn't be declined. And so Tony, Caroline and the children went back to Madras.

On 6 June 1946 Tony was elected president of the Madras Labour Union. The very next day an incident in the mills precipitated a strike. Caroline and her BLPI comrades plunged into strike support activities. After 48 days the union won its key demands. In early 1947 the situation in the B&C Mills heated up again. The union leaders started collecting strike funds, organized a network of neighborhood committees, and recruited 1,000 volunteers to form a workers defense guard. Anticipating that Tony would be arrested once the strike began, the union formed a secret strike committee in which Caroline was to play a leading role. The Trotskyists were the brains and backbone of the committee.

Before dawn on 10 March the police arrested Tony. The secret committee called a mass meeting that evening. At the meeting, according to one eyewitness, “Mrs. Caroline Anthony Pillai's speech at the height of her emotions infused in the workers a new sense of dutifulness and her speech showed them a new path.” (K. Appanraj, *Anja Nenjan*:

*Tomyzh Sowgha Aderka S.C.V. Annon Pillai Vazhaya Karokoru*, Chennai, 1995) She said there would be no negotiations until Tony and the other leaders were released. The next day no. a single one of the more than 14,000 workers entered the B&C Mills. Afraid that the workers would march to the jail where Tony was held, the government transferred Lau to a remote jail in Andhra, where he was placed in solitary confinement.

On 28 March more than 40,000 strikers and their families turned out for a union rally. Caroline, the main speaker, called for a one-day hartal in Madras in support of the strike. More than 100,000 honored the hartal. The mood was militant. Workers created road blocks. The government deployed troops in a massive show of force.

One night, when Caroline and Selina Perera set out for a clandestine meeting of the strike committee in Perambur, they noticed two men following them to the bus stop. Certain that they were CID men, Caroline came up with a plan. When the bus arrived, Caroline told the driver that two men were pursuing them with evil intentions. Caroline stood at the front door of the bus, Selina at the back. As the two policemen tried to board, they kicked them as hard as they could, and the bus sped away.

The next morning, the Malabar Special Police came to Caroline's place and put her under house arrest. That didn't deter Caroline. She wrote notes, pinned them to the inside of her eldest son's trousers, and sent him to rendezvous with the union leaders in Perambur. When the government banned all rallies and demonstrations, Caroline and her comrades devised other ingenious tactics. On one occasion, about 500 strikers infiltrated into the central railway station in little groups and then closed ranks and marched out in a procession shouting slogans, taking the police by surprise.

On 9 June the government illegalized the union, seized its funds, locked its headquarters, and arrested 49 BLPF members. Caroline was put under house arrest. Night after night an army of 10,000 Malabar Special Police terrorized

the mill districts and arrested thousands of strikers. The Madras Labour Union had no choice but to end the strike. Even then nearly 3,000 workers stayed away from the mills in protest. Though the strike was defeated, Caroline and Tony had earned the admiration and support of the working class in Madras. In 1947 Tony was elected president of the Madras Port Trust Employees' Union and the following year he and two of his lieutenants successfully contested the elections to the Madras Municipal Council.

### The "Woman Behind the Man"

In 1948 Caroline gave birth to her third son, Nalin Rajan, and two years later her fourth, Suresh Kumar. As a mother of a large family, she had less and less time and energy for politics. Meanwhile, Tony was becoming more and more consumed by his expanding trade-union responsibilities. He became the general secretary and vice president of the powerful All-India Port and Dock Workers Federation and president of the All-India Transport Workers Union. In 1952 he was elected vice president of the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, the Socialist's all-India trade-union federation.

Though she had to eventually take a back seat to his career, Caroline remained very much his political partner. She advised him, supported him financially in the lean years, assisted with his union work, and sometimes even pushed him to be more militant. She never lost her "Boralagoda fire."

Caroline Anthony Pillai is one of the few living links to a bygone era in politics. She forewent a life of comfort and wealth to fight for the freedom of her country and the uplift of the working classes. She dedicated her life to the revolutionary movement. Fearless, she never flinched in the face of danger and adversity. She inspired and mentored others. She loathed lies, dishonesty, and hypocrisy.

Philip Canawardena has often been called the "Lion of Boralagoda." Caroline deserves to be likewise honored and remembered as the "Lioness of Boralagoda." ■

Charles Wesley Ervin in the studio of *Tomorrow is Over: The Transport Movement in India and Ceylon 1943-1948*.