

## IN MEMORIAM

### SYDNEY WANASINGHE

T. Perera

Sydney Wanasinghe, the veteran LSSP activist died following a heart attack on 28 April 2007 at his home at Wellawatte, Colombo. He was 75 years old. He is survived by his wife Vijitha, daughter Nimalka and two grandchildren.

He had been in failing health for some time, which affected his physical movements but left untouched his marvellous memory. He was a boon for struggling writers researching the left movement.

Sydney was born at Raddoluwa, Seeduwu on 16 February 1932, the son of Louis Wanasinghe, a school principal and Jane Wanasinghe. Sydney was educated at St. Mary's College, Negombo, St. Joseph's College, Colombo and S. Thomas' College, Muiri Lavinia. He joined the LSSP while still a university student in the early 1950s.

He was the live-wire of a group of samasamajists who distributed the party newspapers on the Peradeniya campus. Those were the pre-and post-Hartal days when the LSSP dominated campus politics. Sydney and his comrades would collect bundles of the LSSP weeklies at the Peradeniya railway station and engage in street sales in Kandy.

After his graduation Sydney served as a teacher at Carey College, Colombo, and rose to be headmaster. In 1959 he married Vijitha, a teacher at St. Michael's, Polwatta, who later gave up teaching. In the 1960s Sydney was back at Peradeniya to obtain a teachers' diploma in education. He was also active in the teachers' trade union.

In 1958 he was nominated by the party to contest the Wellawatte North ward of the CMC. He succeeded his friend and party comrade Osmond Jayaratne as the LSSP representative for this ward. In the municipal by-election that ensued Sydney won the seat which he held till 1965.

In the heady varsity days Sydney had teamed up with Vijaya Vidyasagara and Saravana Bagthawan (Baggy), editors of the

*Samasamajist*. In the years to come they were drawn more closely together. Baggy began publishing Marxist classics in pamphlet form under the star press imprint. Eventually Sydney took over where Baggy left off and blossomed as a peerless publisher of left books.

He published a series of writings of Rosa Luxemburg: *On the Spartacus Program, Social Reform or Revolution, What is Economics, The Mass Strike and the Junius Pamphlets* (three editions); and Trotsky's works: *My Flight from Siberia, Marxism and Science, The Problems of Life, The Struggle for State Power and Whither Russia*.

He also initiated the popular *Young Socialist* series, the publication of which coincided with the emergence of the leftwing tendency in the LSSP on the eve of the party split in 1964. At that time he opened a sales outlet – Suriya Bookshop. He also collaborated with Baggy in writing a biography of Leon Trotsky, which he translated and published in Sinhala in 1990. He also published a couple of books by Che Guevara in Sinhala.

In the aftermath of the electoral defeat of the SLFP in the mid 1960s, its coalition allies, the LSSP and the CP unleashed a campaign of chauvinism. It was left to Sydney to document in the *YS* the wave of dreadful diarrheas that appeared in the LSSP and CP press.

Sydney was one of the signatories to the resolution moved by fourteen central council members at the party conference in June 1964 which opposed the resolution of the leadership to enter a coalition government led by the SLFP. Their resolution was defeated by an overwhelming margin and they quit the LSSP to form the LSSP-R. Sydney later rejoined the party.

Under the SLFP-led coalition government (1970-75), in which the LSSP held three ministries, Sydney served as a project manager in the National Savings Bank, and the State Distilleries Corporation.

In the 1990s he formed a publishing partnership with Wesley Muttiah. (Sydney was a couple of years younger than his collaborator Wesley). They embarked on publishing documentary collections: *Britain, World War Two and the Samanawajists* (1996), and *The Bracegirdle Affair* (1998 reprinted in 2006), *The Hartol of 1953* (2002), *The Case for Socialism* (2004), *Socialist Women of Sri Lanka* (2006), *Two Languages, One Nation, One Nation, Two Languages* (2006), a collection of speeches by Colvin R. de Silva; *State Language Question*, speeches in parliament by N.M. Perera and Edmund Samarakkody, in a Sinhala translation by Sydney (1955 and 2006), and a re-publication in 2006 of *Hundred Days in*

*Ceylon under Martial Law* by Armand de Souza, on the 1915 communal riots.

Some of the books were prompted by anniversaries of working class struggles spearheaded by the LSSP, and birth centenaries of the left luminaries. Thanks to the initiative they have ensured that the material they gleaned from the party archives is not forgotten. Sydney was preparing a memoir of his friend Baggy when the final day came.

Three months later Wesley Muttiah, after a brief illness, passed away in London on 4 August. ■

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