

# PREMALAL KUMARASIRI

## MORAL ECONOMY OF A COMMUNIST

Janaka Biyanwila

I first met Premalal at the Social Scientists' Association (SSA) in the mid-1990s. He was doing some English-to-Sinhala translations of SSA publications. As soon as I met him, it was obvious that this was a person with a deep sense of commitment to social justice. His politics towards a 'good society' conveyed a particular notion of moral economy, or values of norms regarding economic activity. He was also a friend of my father from their days in the Communist Party in the 1950s. My father was expelled, while Premalal later became the General-Secretary of the Chinese wing.

I met Premalal again in 2000, but this time as someone who would help with my Ph.D. research on trade unions in Sri Lanka. He carried himself with a confidence and a charm, and with a treasure trove of stories and a brilliant sense of humour. I managed to tape a few of our conversations, in which he touched on a range of issues around social injustice, poverty, class consciousness, women, ethnicity, caste, trade unions, the labour movement, working-class parties (LSSP, CP, JVP and the NSSP), and political struggles. His stories were open and honest, and he never hesitated to highlight the mistakes and missed opportunities of workers' struggles.

For Premalal, the struggle for social justice was fundamentally grounded in democratizing institutions of daily life - families, schools, workplaces, trade unions, religious institutions, as well as political parties. He saw the struggle against British colonialism, not simply as a national struggle but also a class struggle. Organizing workers through the CP in early days had been an extremely difficult task:

"We found it difficult to organize workers in the beginning because they didn't know they had rights. We worked during a period where the workers didn't have a consciousness of their rights (wages, workday, leave, health and safety) Not only did they not have those rights, but they were also not conscious of those rights. One of our greatest contributions was making a class-conscious working-class Politically it helped us also, because class consciousness among workers helps build a revolutionary movement."

The making of a "class-conscious" trade union movement has re-emerged as an urgent task for trade unions. The dominant neo-liberal ideology, promoted by the World Bank and the IMF, along with local capitalist classes, is one of 'business unionism.' Also known as 'responsible' or 'best-practice' unionism, business unionism narrows union interests to a workplace 'group interest,' and its implied aim is to

focus on improving profitability. The neo-liberal mantra, which the workers must regularly chant, is 'productivity, competition and self-responsibility.' This attempt to erase class politics is grounded in de-politicizing and de-mobilizing unions. Unlike most union leaders, Premalal uses the language of "class consciousness" with a sense of hope towards a just moral economy. He saw workers as human beings, not just class actors, and recognized the critical role culture and knowledge play, in mobilizing the oppressed.

Premalal was a political educator throughout his life. He saw education in terms of encouraging a self-transformation capable of fostering social change. He was a key educator within the CP in the 1950s and 1960s, until 1971 when he was arrested for suspected links with the JVP.

"I was the main political teacher, not the political guru, but a teacher in the sense of teaching. I edited the paper; it was an instrument of education. I also edited the magazine off and on, and did classes. Every day, before I was married, I used to come home at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning after teaching in these classes. Of course we had to do this undercover, because the workers would have lost their jobs if caught. So we used to have classes in the night. The lessons were: first, human rights; second, trade union rights; third, class rights; and fourth, revolution."

His sentence ended with an ironical laugh, implying a disappointment in not achieving a revolutionary transformation of society. As a political educator, he always had a collection of stories to get his message across:

"In my teaching, I used to give examples. To explain the Marxist concept of the state machinery, as an instrument to keep the working class down, and to preserve the rule of the bourgeoisie, it has rules and laws which protect capitalist property. If you damage or steal property you go to jail. For instance, you walk along Norris Road or Main Street, and you see all these beautiful shops are there, and inside there are beautiful, multi-coloured saris, trousers, and shirts. You are on the pavement, they are inside. And you think that 'my god, if I could have that, what a wonderful person I could be. But between you and that possession, the sari, there is only a glass that is one centimetre thick. Not even that sometimes. What is there to prevent you from getting that sari, only a piece of glass. But, if you break that glass, you can be sure to be: first, in a police lock-up with two or three ribs broken; then in court; then jail. So this way, I used to explain the efficiency, and the brutality, of the capitalist state machinery and its whole dedication to the protection of capitalist property." ■