

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Capital Punishment

Liberal opinion in Sri Lanka has been horrified by the attempts by the government to revive the death penalty at a moment in time when international opinion is moving towards abolition. It is sad that the new Minister of Justice, Batty Weerakoon of the LSSP has the unenviable task of dealing with the issue. Batty Weerakoon's illustrious mentors of the Left have always been at the forefront of attempts to abolish the death penalty. In 1936, Dr. N. M. Perera the LSSP president, spoke eloquently in the State Council on this issue, as did Dr. Colvin R. de Silva of the LSSP in 1956, on the occasion when S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (who had opposed abolition in 1936), introduced a motion to suspend capital punishment.

In his outstanding book *Hangman Spare that Noose*, Donovan Moldrich gives the history of the movement for abolition in Sri Lanka dating back to 1928 and states that "History shows that in our country over a long period of time repugnance at the death penalty has been felt and expressed by individuals of varying political colorations... this is a matter that should and can be taken out of party politics."

Over many years the campaign for abolition in Sri Lanka has been led by the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) which has noted that "the most prominent miscarriages of justice in recent years have been for crimes that produce the greatest outrage and the loudest calls for vengeance." CRM also emphasises that "The state should not assume the role of executioner... Judicial execution, is not an act of defence against an immediate threat to life. It is the premeditated killing of an identified prisoner for the purpose of punishment, a punishment which could take another form."

It is well known that in most countries those on Death Row are the poor, and in the USA, the proportion of Afro-Americans executed has been very high. As the CRM notes "The poor and the disadvantaged, who do not have the capacity to search for evidence and who have less access to competent and experienced lawyers are the most likely victims of miscarriages of justice."

Asma Jahangir, the noted lawyer from Pakistan and special rapporteur for the UN on extra judicial killings, gave the commemoration lecture for Neelan Tiruchelvam (on January 30th, 2001) in which she gave gruesome details of executions in South Asia (especially Pakistan). The hopeful news, she said, was that more and more countries around the world are abolishing the Death Penalty. The unfortunate fact however is that the USA along with the Republic of Congo and China lead the world in death sentences.

In this issue of *Pravada* we reproduce the speech in the legislature of Dr. N.M. Perera in 1936, and Dr. Colvin R. de Silva in 1956, as well as the recent CRM statement.

Philip Gunawardena Centenary

In this issue we commemorate the centenary of Philip Gunawardena's birth (11 January 1901) by publishing an article about his early years as a Socialist by the LSSP ideologue Hector Abhayavardhana, who from the late 1930s onwards, worked with Philip in the LSSP and along with him, escaped to India during the 'heroic'

period of the party from 1940 to 1945. Although disagreeing with Philip in subsequent years, Hector pays tribute to the revolutionary Philip.

While many on the left regret Philip Gunawardena's drift to Sinhala nationalism and to the UNP, they give him credit for his militant activities as a student in Wisconsin and Illinois, his revolutionary days in London, and contacts with Socialists from all parts of the world including visits to Mexico, Spain, France and Germany, where he met activists of the Left. One must also note that Philip Gunawardena was the earliest in the 1920s to make a Left critique of the Sri Lanka bourgeoisie and an analysis of the labour movement led by A.E. Goonesinha.

In a publication "Whither Ceylon?" written in 1931, Philip called Goonesinha "a man of tremendous initiative and daring," and referred to the militant tramway strike of 1929, praised the workers for challenging "the armed forces of the mightiest Empire the world has ever seen." But he criticized Goonesinha's 'confused leadership' of the strike and his 'tactical blunders' in praising the British Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce after the settlement of the strike. Philip Gunawardena also ridiculed the local bourgeoisie who during the 1929 strike "shivered in their shoes and knelt at the altar of imperialism begging it to save them from their class enemies."

Returning to Sri Lanka in 1932 Philip emerged as a dominant figure of the left movement and was active with other radicals in organizing the Youth Leagues, the Suriya Mal movement, the malaria relief campaign, the Wellawatte Mills strike, and in 1935, the island's first left party, the LSSP. By 1936 he was elected to the State Council, where he was outspoken against British rule, against constitutional reforms that fell short of independence, while advocating the rights of trade unions, the urban working-class and the plantation workers. In and out of the State Council he was the firebrand, who in the words of Wesley Erwin, was "a trail blazing revolutionary who created from scratch a vigorous Left party in an insular country where Left politics barely existed before." But as Erwin observes, Philip was also a "complex and contradictory figure."

He turned his back on a life of privilege in order to fight for his vision of a socialist future. But in 1950 he broke with the LSSP, renounced Trotskyism, and mended fences with the very Stalinists he had booted out of the LSSP a decade earlier. His Marxism morphed into a kind of radical Sinhalese populism. In 1956 he joined Bandaranaike's first coalition government, and in the 1960s he was a minister in a government led by the UNP, the unabashedly capitalist party he had spent much of his life fighting. Many doubted that he could be considered a socialist anymore. Yet when he died, his coffin was draped with a red flag, and inscribed on his grave marker is the hammer and sickle.

The SSA has published a monograph on the occasion of Philip Gunawardena's birth centenary. It is called "Philip Gunawardena, the Making of a Revolutionary" by Charles Wesley Erwin, an American researcher on Trotskyism, who recently had access to the police files dealing with Philip's stay in London in the late 1920s.

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