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Fourth International in Sri Lanka

Bala Tampoe (1922-2014) and the history of the Sri Lankan labour movement

- Features -

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“Death of a legend”, “hero of trade-union movement”, “quintessence of trade-unionism” – the Sri Lankan press and trade-union movement were unanimous in the comments that followed our comrade and friend Bala Tampoe’s death on 1st September 2014. As the former Volvo trade-union leader Göte Kilden said, “had Tampoe carried out his work in one of Europe’s former colonial powers, such as France or Great Britain, his death and remembrance of his life would have been front-page news in all the main media. [1]

As one of Sri Lanka’s main trade-union leaders over the past 60 years, Bala Tampoe negotiated on behalf of workers and made all governments tremble. During 1970 negotiations that Bala had secured through public protest, government minister and former party comrade Colvin R. de Silva (Bala had broken with him in 1964 when de Silva chose to take his party into a bourgeois government) said of him that he was “one of the finest minds not only in trade-union circles but in the whole country.” [2] I personally had occasion to meet Bala in the 1980s and 1990s. During his visits to Europe, he came to me with questions about the rebirth of the workers movement in Poland. I remember him as a very respectful leader who listened closely to the young activist that I was at the time.

Outrage at colonial rule

Balendra Tampoe-Phillips was born in Negombo on May 23, 1922 to a landed Tamil family from Jaffna. His father had been a coconut planter before becoming a civil servant for the British Empire. Bala was eight years old when his father was made a high-ranking civil servant for the Madras Presidency in India. At the time, the colonial government had a quota system for Anglo-Indian (mixed race) students and Bala had to wait a number of years before being admitted into a school. In later years, he recalled, “Actually I was admitted to a school before, but that was because my mother had put down my name as B. T. Phillips. I was very excited at finally being able to go to school, but when the headmaster saw me he said ‘there has been some mistake,’ and pointed out that the quota system had already been filled. This is why my mother asked me to change my name when I returned to Sri Lanka and joined Royal College [...] My great great grandfather was the first Hindu to convert to Christianity in Jaffna. ‘Phillips’ was the name of the man who sponsored the evangelical mission and that’s how I ended up with that name.” [3] A brilliant student, in 1939 Bala Tampoe gained admission both to the University of Ceylon and also won a Cambridge Studentship for having come third in the island at the exam. He was nonetheless treated as sub-human by the colonizers. He recalled how British soldiers treated him when he was out walking with a British woman friend. “One day we were walking outside the Queen’s Hotel and we saw two naval officers coming in the opposite direction. She asked me not to say anything if any remarks were passed. True enough, as they passed us, one of them said ‘Where are you going with THAT?’ ‘That’ was me!” [4]

Had it not been for this omnipresent colonial racism, Bala could well have followed in his father’s footsteps and become an excellent servant of the Empire. In 1935, while still in middle school, Bala joined the anti-imperialist Suriya-Mal Movement, the country’s first pro-independence organization, which became known for launching “The Battle of the Flowers” to commemorate Sri Lankan casualties of the First World War and not just the “British soldiers” to whom the Empire paid tribute in its official ceremonies. [5] “Students become Leftists without any grasp of the working class movement, I was no different,” he later recalled in an interview. [6]

In 1941, he joined the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), an underground Marxist organization of which a number of leaders had just been thrown in jail.

LSSP, new vanguard party

On 18 December 1935, some 20 young intellectuals, students and workers who had played a de facto leadership role in the Suriya-Mal Movement, took the decision to create the LSSP. As a way of highlighting the new party's pro-independence stance, these "founding fathers" opted to reject English-language names for their organization. They also avoided the term "socialist", which they felt was too closely associated with the reformist political tradition within the British Empire. In the Sinhala language – the language used by a large majority of people on the island of Ceylon – the term *samasamaja* relayed the notions of socialism and equality. It had been coined by D. Jayawardana in the issue of the anti-colonial Sinhala-language magazine *Swadesa Mitraya* that came out on the day the party was founded, and so was itself an innovation.

In March 1936, the brand new party ran four candidates in elections to the second Ceylon State Council. Two of them – Philip Gunawardena et N.M. Perera – were elected, and as such represented a real opposition to the island's colonial status within the body. They did so until their arrest in 1940, and in 1939 became the only Trotskyist members of parliament anywhere in the world to come out against the Second World War. The LSSP's prestige grew throughout 1937 and its offices became the place workers in struggle turned to for support. When washermen went on strike in September that year, they went to the LSSP for assistance with negotiations. In the same period, semi-skilled coconut mill workers won a wildcat strike held at the beginning of September to protest the victimization of fellow workers who had organized an LSSP propaganda meeting. In short order, trade unions led by LSSP activists were winning victorious struggles and occupying centre stage. The LSSP succeeded in building a united front of trade unions – which even involved the traditional reformist Ceylon Labour Union led by A.E. Goonesinha, who tried to divide workers with anti-Tamil speeches. The victorious strikes led by this united front were a blow to communalism.

A wave of strikes shook the plantation sector in late 1939 and early 1940, following the start of the Second World War. Initially led by trade unions tied to the Ceylon Indian Congress, the movement soon focused on the strike at the Mool Oya plantation led by Samasamajists from the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union. LSSP State Council members were able to force the holding of a commission of inquiry into conditions on the estates and revealed how the police and employers combined forces to suppress workers within the white man's plantation empire. This was a deeply politicizing experience for the working classes.

While the LSSP was not "Trotskyist" at the time of its foundation, its main leaders were ill at ease with blind obedience to Stalin and critically assessed Comintern policies. In Leslie Goonewardene's words, Samasamajist leaders "could not believe that the confessions in the [Moscow] trials were genuine and felt compelled to come to the conclusion that they were gigantic frame-ups. The line of the Popular Front, especially in Spain, appeared to be dictated, not by the needs of the Spanish Revolution, but by the foreign policy needs of the Soviet Government. The line of the National Front, prescribed for colonial countries, seemed to subserve the same aim. In other words, the Third (Communist) International, founded by Lenin in 1919 to give help and guidance to the socialist revolution throughout the world, had apparently degenerated into an abject instrument of Stalin's changing foreign policies. A careful reading of Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed* (first available in English in 1938) also had a profound effect on the leaders of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party." [7]

In December 1939, Stalin's policies – shifting from support to French and British imperialism to the August 1939 pact with Hitler – prompted the LSSP Executive Committee to pass a historic resolution with 29 votes in favour and 5 against: "Since the Third International has not acted in the interests of the international revolutionary working class movement, while expressing its solidarity with the Soviet Union, the first workers' state, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party declares that it has no faith in the Third International." Soon after, this break between Trotskyists and Stalinists in the LSSP led to the expulsion of the Stalinists from the party. Simultaneously, the party adopted a new program and decided membership in the party entailed not only the payment of dues but also active involvement in the work of a party group or local organization. From a loose gathering of individuals, the LSSP was turned into a fighting

organization of activists. Its opposition to the involvement of Ceylon's peoples in the imperialist war – which took the form of refusal to be conscripted into the “Ceylon Defense Force” – as well as its role in building workers' strikes, made the LSSP the colonial administration's public enemy number one. In June 1940 a detention order was issued for the party's five main leaders (one of whom, Leslie Goonawardene, evaded arrest and went underground), and party activities were obstructed and then outlawed. The LSSP was forced underground, had to print its press and leaflets at a secret printshop and was banned from organizing public meetings, with attempts at holding them regardless brutally put down by the police.

This was where things stood in the party that Bala Tampoe joined in 1941, recruited by his friend RCL “Dicky” Attygalle. He became a member of the “special unit” set up by the party to organize its leaders' escape from jail. Under the assumed name of “Kuruppu”, Bala was in charge of communication with the imprisoned leaders. Following their jail-break on the eve of Japan's April 1942 air raid against the British Indian Ocean fleet and airforce based in Ceylon, Bala and the “special unit” arranged for their underground stay in Anuradhapura and subsequent transfer to India. [8]

Upon their return to Colombo, “Dicky” and Bala took charge of distributing anti-war propaganda among British troops, including one pamphlet that talked about “the rising sun of Japan and the setting sun of Churchill”. As Bala later told the story, “We had won over three British soldiers, who undertook to distribute the pamphlet in the canteens of the army. I paid some street urchins 50 cents to distribute the document in the cinemas which were mainly patronised by British service personnel. It had a huge impact. The commanding officer had threatened action against anyone found with the pamphlet on his or her person. In fact, Tomlinson's book titled “The Most Dangerous Moment” (i.e. the threatened invasion of Ceylon by the Japanese fleet for which the British was not prepared), carried a copy of that pamphlet.” [9]

A number of the LSSP's leaders had been forced into exile on the Indian subcontinent. In April 1942, the LSSP joined with the Bolshevik Leninist Party of the United Provinces and Bihar and the Bolshevik Mazdoor [Workers] Party of India to found the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India, Ceylon and Burma (BLPI), pan-Indian section of the Fourth International. Bala was one of the founders of this new party, and was in charge of worker education within it.

The two historic LSSP leaders, N.M. Perera and P. Gunawardena, were arrested in India in 1943 and released from prison at the end of the war. When the two leaders relaunched the legal LSSP in 1945, Bala Tampoe remained in the BLPI (whose name soon changed to the Bolshevik Samasamaja Party – BSP), which was opposed to “independence” within the British Empire. The immediate post-war years saw a big upturn in labour and people's struggles in Ceylon, and both Trotskyist parties played an important leadership role.

In the 1947 elections, the LSSP won ten seats (to become the second strongest party in parliament) and the BSP five. The two parties joined forces during the 1946 and 1947 general strikes, ultimately leading to the reunification of the two parties in 1950, in spite of the physical attacks carried out during the 1949 by-election in Gampaha that enabled the Right to take the seat. But the years of division had weakened the Samasamajists, diminishing their potential in the post-war period and enabling the Right to consolidate its forces. [10]

Militant trade-unionism and the Great *Hartal*

After the war, Trotskyist militants played a central role in the trade-union movement. They led two trade-union federations: the Ceylon Federation of Labour and the Ceylon Workers Congress. In 1944, Bala Tampoe began teaching botany and horticulture at the University of Peradeniya. By now very familiar with underground work, he started holding secret training courses for members of the public-sector workers union, the GCSU. In 1947, he was

dismissed from his job following what he himself called a “scathing public speech”. He found work with the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), led with an iron fist by A.E. Goonasinha. Founded in 1928, the CMU was a small trade union with a few hundred white-collar workers as members. At the CMU convention on the 1st of February 1948, Bala Tampoe ran against Goonasinha for the position of general secretary and won. He held this position until his death, and transformed this small trade union into a major federation, with tens of thousands of members in every sector of the economy and from all ethnic, religious and political backgrounds.

From 1948 on, however, the mass movement went into decline. Though leading the parliamentary opposition, the LSSP was unable to emerge as a credible alternative. More than 200,000 workers of Indian origin were deprived of their civil rights. The May 1952 elections were once again won by the United National Party (UNP), the bourgeois party in power since independence. Worse, the LSSP was displaced as the main parliamentary opposition party by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which was supported by the CP and Philip Gunawardena’s VLSSP. [\[11\]](#)

In such a context, the UNP government felt its hands were free to attack the population. It increased the (subsidized) price of sugar and cut rice rations. The LSSP was quick to react, organizing an active campaign against these measures. A petition against price increases gathered 50,000 signatures, but the government was unmoved. In 1953, train fares and postal rates were increased and lunchtime bread distribution to schoolchildren was stopped. The price for rice rations shot up from 25 to 70 cents!

The LSSP called on all opposition parties to build a united front against the government. Only the CP, the VLSSP and the Federal Party heeded their call to action. But a trade-union front was established, though one weakened by the refusal of the Indian Congress, which led a number of plantation-worker unions, to organize the strike. The trade-union called for a *hartal* – or work stoppage and general shutdown of all activity – on August 12. The government warned public-sector workers that they would be fired if they went on strike, ordered co-op stores to remain open, and had the army march through the streets. State-run media unanimously denounced industrial action, with a major paper going so far as to run the headline “Work Goes On As Usual!”

Still, the *hartal* was a great success, “bigger than expected”. The strike was massive, transportation was disrupted, and all economic activity ground to a halt in the cities. Even the plantations were partially shut down. In rural areas, people erected road blockades and disrupted telegraph service. Protestors occupied the Egoda Uyana railway station and literally “captured” a train there. In Waskaduwa, more than a kilometre of train track was uprooted overnight; and in the Southern province boulders so huge were used to block the road that after the *hartal* police had to use dynamite in order to remove them.

Police and soldiers opened fire on protestors, killing nine people and injuring many more. A state of emergency and curfew were declared at noon and remained in place for several weeks. The LSSP and CP printshops were shut down.

Planned to last for only one day, the *hartal* was officially called off the following morning by organizers. The effects of the mobilization would last much longer. It punctured the myth of invincibility surrounding the UNP, ultimately leading to its election defeat in 1956. Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake was forced to tender his resignation. The masses became aware of their strength and the *hartal* signalled a resurgence of the mass movement.

Bala Tampoe was at the helm of the CMU and played a major organizing role in this struggle, whose lessons he summed up in the following way: “The *Hartal* [...] taught the urban working class that their brothers and sisters of the village are indeed mighty allies in any direct struggle. It taught both the workers and the rural poor that, together, they are fully capable of challenging and even smashing the forces of the capitalist state. ... The masses will enter the next great struggle with the confidence they have gained from the *Hartal*. But the next struggle will be against a more experienced and better prepared enemy.” [\[12\]](#)

1953 was also the year Bala Tampoe was sworn in as a lawyer, in which capacity he was able to defend many workers and activists.

Crisis and struggle in the LSSP

Despite the LSSP's involvement in struggle, the electoral setback of 1952 had left the party divided. In contrast to Bala Tampoe's views, almost one third of party members felt that the hartal proved it was impossible to change the socio-economic state of affairs through mass mobilization and that the party would be unable to win the upcoming elections on its own.

As early as the special party conference held in October 1952, the LSSP had decided to advocate a "united front with the CP and the Philip Gunawardena group". A minority resolution went even further, calling on the party to prioritize the establishment of a "democratic government" which, it said, would be "at least a Bandaranaike government" and at best "a Sama Samaja majority government". The CP refused to join a united front unless the LSSP promised to stop criticizing the governments of the USSR, Eastern Europe and China, so no progress in this direction was possible beyond common work around the *hartal*. At the party's national convention in October 1953, the majority resolution received 259 votes to the minority's 125. Led by William Silva, the minority then left the convention and quit the party. The LSSP lost a third of its members – some of whom ended up in the CP, and others joined Philip Gunawardena's VLSSP, but the vast majority left politics altogether.

In 1954, LSSP leader N.M Perera was elected mayor of Colombo. But the LSSP was unable to secure a majority on the municipal council, and those elected as part of the "united front" around the CP rejected all forms of cooperation. Within a year, these "united front" councillors teamed up with the UNP and removed Perera from office.

From 1954 onward, and basing itself on the lessons of the hartal, the CMU organized a series of struggles among retail workers, forcing the employers federation to grant a number of concessions. These struggles helped rebuild workers' confidence in their strength and reached a peak in 1956, when the CMU led a general strike by workers in the retail sector. The CMU forced employers to accept collective bargaining, and became one of the most powerful trade unions in Sri Lanka. As Leslie Goonawardene would later write in his history of the LSSP, "the role of P.B. Tampoe deserves mention." [\[13\]](#)

Confronted with a new rise in social struggle, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie elected to divide the working class. Taking advantage of the Sinhalese cultural renaissance and desire to jettison English as an official language, the bourgeoisie set Sinhalese against Tamils, who formed the majority in the plantation areas. The SLFP organized campaigns to have Sinhala recognized as the "only official language" – against the use of English, of course, but especially against Tamil! Promoting the Sinhala language went hand-in-hand with promoting Buddhism, portrayed as the country's only national culture. The LSSP was the only Sinhalese-majority party in favour of recognizing two official languages, Sinhala and Tamil. Its public gatherings were attacked by roving gangs of thugs from the "Sinhala Only" movement. In the 1956 elections, the Philip Gunawardena group joined forces with the SLFP within the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) or People's United Front, which defeated the ruling UNP. The LSSP won 14 seats and was once again the main opposition party.

The new Bandaranaike government made a number of concessions to workers. It nationalized the bus companies and Colombo harbour (while rejecting the LSSP demand to guarantee worker oversight of the management of nationalized companies), tabled legislation on paddy lands and cooperatives, began setting up a national social security fund, and ended the anti-union approach of previous governments – gradually reinstating civil servants who had been sacked following the 1947 general strike. He also shut down British military bases on the island.

In addition to these progressive measures, however, in 1956 the government also enacted the law making Sinhala the only official language, with UNP support. This in spite of the fact that almost 30 percent of the population (Tamils from India, Sri Lankan Tamils and Muslims) spoke Tamil. This sparked riots and a new State of Emergency lasting several months. Bala Tampoe, himself a Tamil but also recognized as one of the country's best orators in Sinhala, mobilized his entire union in favour of equal treatment for the country's different communities. It was not until 1958 that opponents managed to win a partial rollback of the legislation – a new law authorizing the use of Tamil in teaching, public-sector recruitment exams, and government correspondence regarding administrative matters in the northern and eastern provinces. (Unfortunately, the new law was never implemented fully and was the subject of political agitation by the Federal Party in the 1960s and early 1970s.)

During the initial years of the Bandaranaike government, LSSP-led unions led strikes, including general strikes, and won wage increases. Strikers often ran up against the army, for example in December 1957.

Two lines

The March 1959 political general strike organized by a large number of trade unions, including the CMU, marked a qualitative turning point. On this occasion, the labour movement was opposing a legislative amendment authorizing the prime minister to call out the army and police when the prime minister felt there was a threat to public safety. For the first time ever, workers were demanding the right to express their opposition to legislative initiatives.

The majority of the LSSP leadership increasingly saw these mass movements as primarily a means to create a better relationship of forces in parliament. However, Bala Tampoe – at the time both a member of the LSSP Political Bureau and a trade-union leader – saw the self-organization of workers as the beginning of new social relations and seizure of power by the masses. He also felt that in Sri Lanka only common struggle would unite Sinhalese and Tamil workers and put an end to Sinhalese chauvinism and the rise of Buddhist extremists. He argued that the September 1959 assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike by a Buddhist monk was not only the answer from Buddhist extremists to the partial rollback of the Sinhala-only law the previous year, but also a bursting forth of the most reactionary forces in response to the politicization of workers strikes.

Government instability following the Bandaranaike assassination, and the difficulty the LSSP encountered trying to achieve electoral or parliamentary unity with the other working-class parties, enabled the revolutionary minority in the leadership to orient the party to labour struggles. Since the LSSP majority saw no difference between electoral unity between parties and the unity of trade unions in struggle – since the unions were (and are still today, with the exception of the CMU) led by parties – and indiscriminately called both types of unity a “united front”, Bala Tampoe was among those who succeeded in reorienting the party toward a “united front” of struggle.

In September 1963, on Bala Tampoe's initiative, a front of the three Left parties organized a meeting of 800 delegates, representing a million workers from cities, villages and plantations. The meeting adopted the “21 demands” – largely economic, but anti-capitalist in character.

Fresh from this meeting, the CMU called a strike at the Colombo harbour, which quickly turned into a 17-day island-wide general strike and political confrontation with the government. The action forced the SLFP government of Sirima Bandaranaike (widow of the assassinated prime minister) to retreat, to withdraw the army sent out to crush the dockers strike, and to lift the State of Emergency. Bala Tampoe was the main leader of this general strike.

Sirima Bandaranaike had to publicly acknowledge that the country had become ungovernable. But she soon turned things around by extending an olive branch to LSSP leaders and offering to bring them into the government,

something she accomplished in June 1964. She announced to the press: “We have brought into the government a party which plays a dominant role among the urban working class [...] Without the working class lending their full support, I just cannot see how enterprises like the CTB [Ceylon Transport Board] or the Port Cargo Corporation can operate effectively.” [14]

Against betrayal, the LSSP(R)

N.M. Perera, Cholmondeley Goonawardena and Anil Moonesinghe's entry into an SLFP-led coalition government triggered division between two orientations that had co-existed for years within the LSSP. At the LSSP convention, 159 delegates (representing 25 percent of mandated representatives) voted against entering government. Fourteen members of the Central Committee, including two members of parliament (Edmund Samarakkody and Meryl Fernando) and the best known trade-unionist, Bala Tampoe, formed the LSSP (Revolutionary). They issued the following statement: “This degeneration is the logical outcome of the parliamentary reformist line which the majority of the leadership of the party has followed for several years and the substitution of parliamentary and reformist struggle in place of class struggle and revolutionary perspectives, and the systematic recruitment of non-revolutionary elements into the party on that basis. The revolutionaries of the LSSP have, in this situation, decided to organize themselves on the basis of the party program. They therefore withdraw from the conference and will hereafter function as a separate organization under the name of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party [Revolutionary Section].”

The Fourth International expelled the LSSP and recognized the Emergency Conference of the LSSP(R) held on 17-18 July 1964 as “officially constituting the continuing body of the Trotskyite movement in Ceylon and to empower it to speak for and conduct any matters pertaining to the section of the Fourth International in Ceylon.” Fifty-four delegates at the Emergency Conference voted in favour of a resolution accepting “the recognition granted, and will hereafter function as the Ceylon Unit of the Fourth International,” with 9 against and 8 abstentions. [15] The revolutionary militants of the LSSP “were forced to form a new party although hesitantly on the part of some leaders/members. The situation also exposed a deep seated ailment within the left movement: sectarianism, splintering and personal egos of the leaders.” [16]

Bala Tampoe and his comrades felt that entry into the coalition government would only demobilize the working class, and that the “21 demands” had been betrayed. As then LSSP activist Laksiri Fernando would later recall, “The trade union movement could not recover from this debacle for a long time or until today.” [17] The trade-unions were not crushed in 1964, but they were demoralized.

The LSSP's entry into government and the split that followed brought about a long-term division and weakening of the Sri Lankan working class. Many activists left the LSSP but did not join the LSSP(R). In July 1964, the CMU led an exemplary strike at the Velona textile mill in Moratuwa, receiving broad support from the local population. Though 500 workers were on strike, some 4000 people joined the picket lines set up to prevent strikebreakers hired by management from getting into the plant. Bala Tampoe was on site every day and kept up the picketers' spirits. But the strike failed to spread as the Colombo harbour strike had done, and the pickets were forced to retreat in the face of the army. The strike was broken.

In December 1964, the two LSSP(R) members of parliament, Edmund Samarakkody and Meryl Fernando, refused to support a vote of confidence in the Bandaranaike government and the government fell. It was not just about a motion tabled by a right-wing member and supported by the UNP, as their former LSSP comrades alleged, nor a vote against the nationalization of the major press organs, contrary to the voting record of previously pro-government members. A majority of workers still had the hope – or rather the illusion – that the Bandaranaike government was going to at least partially meet the “21 demands”, and they felt that the LSSP(R) had prevented this from happening. The outcome of early elections held in March 1965 reflected this mass-level misunderstanding; the LSSP(R) was

shut out of parliament and the UNP won the elections. The party then experienced division and splits, growing weaker and weaker each day.

Only the trade union led by Bala Tampoe, the CMU, persisted as a real independent expression of working-class strength. Despite a period of downturn in trade-union struggles, the CMU organized dozens of strikes in the late 1960s, especially against the summary dismissal of workers, leading the UNP prime minister to negotiate directly with Bala to find ways of addressing the issue. Bala Tampoe proposed that the State should step in and examine grounds for removal. Tampoe submitted a legal draft which laid the foundation for the Termination of Employment Act that was enacted in 1971. [18]

In defense of JVP insurgents

Maoist Ceylonese youth radicalized at the end of the 1960s. The two main historic parties of the Left – the LSSP and pro-Moscow CP – had betrayed by joining the government, thereby creating a void on the Left, especially in the Sinhalese countryside. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front – JVP) began to fill this void, recruiting among semi-proletarian rural youth, landless peasants, the unemployed and oppressed. This new movement had a Stalinist political culture, and its activists had a rudimentary understanding of Marxism and an ingrained anti-Trotskyism.

Bala Tampoe immediately grasped that this radicalization could be organized neither by the trade-union movement, including the CMU, nor the LSSP(R) (which in 1970 became the Revolutionary Marxist Party, or RMP), which had little influence among young people. He sought to build a relationship based on debate and cooperation with the JVP, something which began in earnest in the wake of the state repression that came down on the JVP in 1970.

One of the historic leaders of the JVP, Lionel Bopage, later recalled: "When the JVP was in its formation stages, in its original clandestine form, known as the 'movement', the Revolutionary Marxist Party (the RMP) led by comrade Bala was one of the first groups that expressed critical solidarity towards it. The JVP's first encounter with more radical Sama-Samajists was when the comrades of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) Ananada Premasinghe and Marshal Perera appeared on behalf of comrade Rohana Wijeweera when he was incarcerated by the state in 1970. Though we had Stalinist and Maoist political affiliations and they had Trotskyite political affiliations, those differences did not matter when it came to opposing state repression. We had something in common, the real danger to our democratic rights of freedom to political expression from the ruling elite." [19] Nearly 40 years on, Bopage also said: "I recollect comrade Bala teasingly calling us 'Little Lenins', implying that we knew only a little of Lenin." [20]

Sent to Sri Lanka by the Swedish section of the Fourth International in 1971, Göte Kilden later recalled: "The LSSP(R) arranged a "discreet" meeting where I got to meet Rohana Wijeweera and some other leaders of the JVP youth movement, which was under surveillance by Sri Lankan intelligence. Rohana and his comrades had built up a mass base among the country's poor rural proletariat in the central part of the island and had a political line that fluctuated somewhere between Maoism and Castroism. According to Bala Tampoe they were, unfortunately, also infected by both national chauvinism (little understanding of the Tamil proletariat) and militarism. They professed to embrace an optimal synthesis of Che Guevara's "foco" strategy and Lin Piao's "people's war" [...] The meeting lasted a long time and was mostly about Europe. Rohana and his friends wanted to know everything about May 68 and the long wave of strikes in Italy, but even about such things as the Swedish miners' strike of 1969-1970. They also wanted to hear how the old labour movement had behaved (an example for the LSSP). Of course, we also discussed economics, class and politics. The JVPers were very proud of their many years of "popular education" during which they had criss-crossed large parts of the island teaching young people about economics and politics. Later on during my visit, I attended a fascinating joint open-air meeting of the JVP, LSSP(R) and CMU where, among others, Bala Tampoe and Rohana Wijeweera entertained the audience for hours with educational speeches adapted for the many

people in the audience with limited formal education. It was like a contest between a wise old activist and a young energetic challenger. That's the kind of thing you never forget!" [\[21\]](#)

A few months later, the JVP launched an armed insurrection against the government. Poorly armed and lacking military experience, they nonetheless managed to take control of parts of the central and southern areas of the country. The revolt was only put down thanks to support from the air forces of India and Maoist China. Some 15,000 youth were murdered in cruel massacres. JVP leaders and about 50,000 people seen as JVP supporters were imprisoned; and Bala Tampoe acted as their lawyer.

"In fact his brilliant knowledge and understanding of Marxism brought another dimension to the whole CJC trial in that a holistic class perspective of the April 1971 insurrection could be presented. While the state represented in the unholy alliance of the SLFP, the LSSP and the CP were scurrilously trying to portray the JVP as a bunch of murderous terrorists. With the assistance of Bala and his team we could fight these allegations vigorously. The RMP, the CMU and comrade Bala continued to protest against the illegal and continued detention of cadres and leaders of the JVP. They defended the democratic rights of the JVP to publicize their political views by appearing in the courts on behalf of some of the JVP activists. The CMU protested against the arrest and detention of nearly four thousand JVP activists, many who had been tortured by the security forces. They also opposed the declaration of a state of emergency in March 1971 which empowered the security forces to dispose dead bodies without post mortem examinations. Comrades Prins Rajasooriya, Sylvester Jayakody and other members of the CMU were also held in detention for some time. They also published interviews with JVP leaders including comrade Rohana thus providing an international audience to the JVP point of view.

"At the main trial of the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC) I had the occasion to meet with, talk to and familiarise myself with comrade Bala Tampoe and the fabulous work done by the CMU on behalf of the working class [...] Comrade Bala and his team [...] not only wanted to challenge the legality of the CJC Act and the trial but also to continue to stay behind and defend the suspects even if the legal challenge failed, thus exposing the political farce of the trial. [...] The RMP, the CMU and comrade Bala did not have any doubt that the JVP in the seventies was a genuine youth movement seeking redress to the socio-economic issues that affected them [...] It was on a decision made by the CMU that Comrade Bala and the team appeared on behalf us of or advised us, the accused of the main trial. Thereafter, throughout the main trial, comrades Rohana Wijeweera, Jayadeva Uyangoda, Kelly Senanayake and myself regularly met with comrade Bala and his team. Most of the trial was full of political sparks with the state prosecutors and the judges on one side and us and our counsel on the other side of the fence. Comrade Bala and his team demonstrated not only their brilliant legal skills but also their astute political skills in uncompromisingly exposing the acts of class betrayal by the government of the day and their supporters. The trial also exposed fault lines in the JVP. It exposed us as being politically immature, romantic and adventurist in our methods of struggle [...]

"During the long political discussions we had in the seventies, comrade Bala often talked about the need of the deadwood in the left giving way to new shoots who from his perspective were not being nourished. I believe this analysis is still valid." [\[22\]](#)

The RMP and CMU continued their struggle to free political prisoners, including those from the JVP. When JVP leaders were released from prison in November 1977, they quite naturally went to the CMU and RMP office to hold their first press conference.

Initially, JVP activists maintained good political relations with the RMP and CMU. But this wasn't enough to clear away the "deadwood" on the Left or in general, and not in the political culture of the rebuilt JVP either. The attempted general strike in 1980 was a failure and the trade-union movement was not only demoralized but also largely destroyed. In the early 1980s, Bala Tampoe had persuaded JVP leaders of the need to build "a collective campaign based on a minimum set of demands relating to the working class, students and the working people carried out by a

broad left platform of the JVP, the CMU, the LSSP and the CP. While the campaign launch was successful, internal resistance within the JVP against this campaign was building up as the JVP cadres found it hard to collaborate with the LSSP and the CP who were at the other end of the political spectrum in the seventies [...] Though we continued to have a couple of meetings afterwards, the JVP rank and file was less than enthusiastic in making these meetings successful. Common sense and a proper class approach would have helped in ameliorating the situation but sadly that was not the nature of politics of the day.” [23] The author of these words, Lionel Bopage, was JVP general secretary at the time, but disagreed with its evolution toward Sinhalese chauvinism and left the party in 1985. [24] Interviewed several years later, Bala Tampoe had the following to say about the JVP: “They were not terrorists back in 1971, and the court agreed with my arguments in this regard. The late eighties was a different story altogether. By that time they were engaging in unadulterated terrorist activity.” [25]

Against the current of defeat

Following the defeat of the 1980 general strike, the Sri Lankan labour movement ceased to play a central political role in the country. This was a consequence of both the betrayal of the majority of the LSSP leadership and the new Sinhala-chauvinist direction taken by the anti-colonial tradition under the leadership of the SLFP in the 1950s and 60s. What’s more, except for a six-month period in 1989, emergency legislation – the Prevention of Terrorism Act – has remained in force in the country from 1979 until the present day.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Bala Tampoe was among those who educated and spurred on the working class for their self-emancipation based on taking power through self-organization and mobilization. Critical of the majority in the LSSP leadership, he had attempted to build a relationship of forces that would take the party beyond its electoralist orientation. The entry of LSSP leaders into government brought an end to the potential of such attempts.

Though on many occasions a candidate in elections, Bala had no illusions in the role parliament could play in changing society. Near the end of his life, he explained: “Most political parties look upon workers as voters. And the best way to do it is enroll them if possible in trade unions, which are organised and controlled by them. My whole experience and knowledge of parliamentary politics is that the capitalist system has been able to maintain control of the system politically. There have been dictatorships, which arose in exceptional contexts and ultimately could not survive. And they were replaced by electoral parliamentary systems which trapped the majority of the people as voters. And then invariably the government-opposition bi-polar context serves the capitalist system like a switch. It goes on and off. When the pressure rises too much on one, it goes over to the other. It is a safety valve. The parliament has evolved as the complement to the capitalist economic system and capitalist rule.” [26]

While continuing to work within the labour movement, Bala Tampoe tried to save the revolutionary Samasamajist tradition in the post-1964 period by building a new party, the LSSP(R), which later became the RMP. Drawing the lessons from the history of the global Trotskyist movement, he had no illusions that the LSSP(R) and RMP would become what the LSSP had been in the 1940-1964 period; and so didn’t think that the new small party could one day become the revolutionary party that the Sri Lankan proletariat needs. Indeed, he hoped that new waves of radicalization – out of which the JVP emerged – would foster the “new shoots” required for a future revolutionary party. The failed experience with the JVP didn’t alter his opinion regarding the impossibility of building a genuine mass party out of the RMP. The building of the RMP was a failure. Led by the main CMU leader, this small organization increasingly became the “political expression” of the trade union. One could say somewhat schematically that, in a reversal of the usual relationship when trade unions are tied to parties, it was the more powerful CMU that controlled “its” party. Bala realized the difficulty inherent to being both trade-union and party leader. He arranged talks with other organizations of the radical Left and participated in the discussions that led to the rapprochement of the Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya (NSSP) [27] with the Fourth International, which he always saw as an indispensable international tool for collectivizing the experience of revolutionaries from around the world.

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A revolutionary activist since his youth, Bala Tampoe understood that a revolutionary party had to work within the working-class movement; and that the trade unions – organizations of all workers gathered together to defend their daily living and working conditions – was the foundation for building the party. He claimed that fundamentally he was a humanist and that all his life he first considered people as human beings, then as workers and finally as members of the union. “That’s the way we come and that’s the way we ought to approach life. This is the fundamental teaching of the union and I believe this is why we have been successful and achieved what we have.” [28] He argued that the role of the revolutionary party – or in its absence, groups of activists – was to lead humankind in this direction.

In the cruel inter-communal war that ravaged the country, Bala Tampoe always acted in defense of the Tamil people’s dignity and right to self-determination. This didn’t prevent him, though, from criticizing the main Tamil nationalist organization for its violent acts. He did everything in his power to galvanize the labour movement against the repression meted out against the Tamil people and its organizations. In a written tribute to Bala Tampoe, NSSP leader Vickrambahu Karunaratne wrote: “In 2010 when pro-government thugs tried to kill me when I was returning from London, after addressing a Tamil commemoration meeting, he embraced me and said “you are a true Sama Samajist living among us”.” [29]

Bala’s internationalism also applied to his trade-union work: “Like transnationals, we must have cross-border interaction and contacts with the international trade union movement. As a joint force, we are better equipped to face the challenges of the future.” [30]

In a period of ebbing struggle, and even though he admitted with irony that “trade unionism inevitably leads to a negotiation of the terms of exploitation,” he sought to defend and extend workers’ rights, aware of the fact that these gains served as the underpinning for the future development of struggle. In 1983, he said: “I see history as waves. So far we have been in a receding wave. But even in the gloomy oppressive atmosphere of Jayewardene’s rule, I can see an advancing wave that will soon shatter all tyrannical forces ahead of it.” [31]

To this end, he drafted a Workers Charter of Rights, having negotiated the terms with Mahinda Rajapaksa during the latter’s time as minister of Labour (1994-1997). The Charter fell by the wayside in the absence of majority support in parliament. When Rajapaksa was elected president and had a two-thirds majority in parliament, Bala mobilized the unions to demands its adoption along with the ratification of International Labour Organization conventions 87 and 98 on trade-union freedoms and collective bargaining. On 1st May 2013, he declared: “Today [Rajapaksa] has a two-thirds majority. Is it even taken up today? No! That is because today they say it is irrelevant. I can see that there is lack of solidarity amongst workers. It is time to revive the power of the worker. We may not have the power of the ballot. But we certainly have the power of labour.” [32] It was to this “power of labour” that Bala Tampoe dedicated his life.

Translation from French: Nathan Rao

[1] Göte Kilden, “[Bala Tampoe Ärr död – en unik människa har lämnat oss](#)”.

[2] Rajan Philips, “Colombo’s glitter and gutter, casino politics and toilet tax economics, and May Day Honours to Bala Tampoe”, [The Island, 3 May 2014](#).

[3] Quoted by Malinda Seneviratne, “[The Bala Tampoe story](#)”.

[4] Ibid.

[5] [George Jan Lerski, "Origins of Trotskyism in Ceylon".](#)

[6] Meera Srinivasan, "A lifetime of protest – In conversation with Bala Tampoe, the oldest active trade union member in Sri Lanka", [The Hindu, 18 August 2013.](#)

[7] Leslie Goonawardene, [A Short History of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party.](#)

[8] Malinda Seneviratne, "The Bala Tampoe story", op. cit. (note 3).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Only the current led by Philip Gunawardena opposed the LSSP-BSP merger and formed its own party, the NLSSP and later the VLSSP, which initially formed alliances with the CP, then with the MEP and the SLFP. Gunawardena was appointed minister of Agriculture in the 1956 S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike government

[11] The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was founded in 1951 by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, a bourgeois politician elected to the Ceylon State Council between 1931 and 1947, and who in 1935 had founded a Sinhalese nationalist party, the Sinhala Maha Sabha. In 1946, faced with the danger of Left ascendancy, the entire range of bourgeois organizations joined together in the United National Party (UNP), which won the 1947 elections and formed the first government of independent Ceylon. In 1951, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike left the UNP and founded the SLFP, which spoke of "non-revolutionary socialism" and joined the Socialist International, but focussed especially on pushing a Sinhalese chauvinist campaign against Tamils and "other Indians", under the "Sinhala only" banner.

[12] Bala Tampoe, "Some Lessons of the Hartal". Written in 1956, quoted in Ahilan Kadirgamar, ["From the Hartal of 1953 to Weliwerija: Bala Tampoe and the Inspiration for Struggle".](#)

[13] Leslie Goonawardene, "A Short History of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party", op. cit. (note 7).

[14] *Ceylon News*, 24 September 1964, quoted by Robert N. Kearney, *Trade Unions and Politics in Ceylon*, University of California Press, 1971.

[15] Quoted in [Asia Times.](#)

[16] [Colombo Telegraph "Some reminiscences of Bala Tampoe".](#)

[17] Laksiri Fernando, "Our comrade Bala is no more", *Sri Lanka Guardian*, quoted in [The Independent.](#)

[18] D.B.S. Jayaraj, ["Comrade Bala Tampoe – Trade Union Fireband".](#)

[19] Lionel Bopage, ["Comrade Bala Tampoe, the legend is no more!".](#) [http.](#)

[20] Lionel Bopage, ["A Fraternal Message to Comrade Bala Tampoe and the Ceylon Mercantile Union", 1st February 2008.](#) [http.](#)

[21] Göte Kilden, op. cit. (note 1).

[22] Lionel Bopage, "A Fraternal...", op. cit. (note 19).

[23] Ibid.

[24] "It was in 1983 itself, the JVP started moving away from even recognising the Tamil people's right to self-determination. Thus, it moved from being a socialist party to a chauvinistic one. The political opportunism of its leadership was a critical factor in this shift. They revived the slogan 'Indian Expansionism' which had featured in the JVP programme before 1972. The JVP's social base mainly comprised of rural,

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semi-proletarian and petit bourgeois Buddhist Sinhala youth. The neo-colonial political and economic developments in the country were not conducive to building political relationships between the Sinhala and Tamil youth; and the interaction of most of the JVP's membership with Tamils was minimal, so that empathy towards the issues facing the Tamil people was limited." Excerpt from a 2013 interview with Lionel Bopage in the Australian publication, [Green Left Weekly https](#).

[25] Quoted by Malinda Seneviratne, "The Bala Tampoe story", op. cit. (note 3).

[26] Ahilan Kadirgamar, [//www.economicdemocratisation.org/?q=content/hartal-1953-weliweriya-bala-tampoe-and-inspiration-struggle](http://www.economicdemocratisation.org/?q=content/hartal-1953-weliweriya-bala-tampoe-and-inspiration-struggle)>"From the Hartal of 1953 to Weliweriya: Bala Tampoe and the Inspiration for Struggle" (Collective for Economic Democratisation in Sri Lanka, 11 August 2013).

[27] The Nava Sama Samaja Pakshaya (NSSP) was founded by activists from the Vama Samasamaja tendency, expelled from the LSSP in 1977. This tendency had been set up by young LSSP activists who had been against entry into government in 1964 but decided to build an opposition within the party. As part of this effort, they invited international Marxist leaders such as Ernest Mandel and Tony Banda to speak at the University of Peradeniya, where they were based. In 1991, the NSSP became the Sri Lankan section of the Fourth International. RMP members, including Bala Tampoe and May Wickramasuriya, his wife since 1966 and one of the main leaders of the CMU ("the main leader," Bala Tampoe would say), became individual members while focussing largely on building the CMU.

[28] Quoted by Malinda Seneviratne, "The Bala Tampoe story", op. cit. (note 3).

[29] "Bala Tampoe struggled against British imperialism", [Ceylon Today, 4 September 2014](#).

[30] Quoted in [Sunday Times](#).

[31] Quoted by Lionel Bopage in "Comrade Bala Tampoe, the legend is no more!", op.cit. (note 18).

[32] Quoted in [Colombo Telegraph](#).