

## IN MEMORIAM

### K. APPANRAJ (1923-2007)

Charles Wesley Ervin

K. Appanraj, a veteran of the Trotskyist movement in India, died at his home in Chennai (Madras) on November 5, 2007 at the age of 84. Appanraj had been a founding member of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the Indo-Ceylonese section of the Fourth International from 1942 to 1948. He played a key role in building the BLPI into a mass-based party in South India in the tumultuous and pivotal years leading up to the forced British withdrawal in 1947. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to get to know Appanraj through the many letters that we exchanged over the last few years, while I was writing my book on the BLPI. More than anyone else, it was he who brought that history alive for me. Though he had drifted from the Trotskyist movement in his later years, he recounted his revolutionary past with pride and no regret. I offer this tribute as a salute to a man who devoted his life, from his teenage years to the very end, to the long and hard struggle for the freedom of his country and the uplift of all the oppressed.

Karuppiyah Appanraj was born in 1923 at Madurai in the British Madras Province (now Tamil Nadu), the son of M. Karuppia Servai. He grew up in exciting times. The Indian National Congress had already become a powerful mass movement capable of rousing millions from every walk of life to the bruising and bloody fight for freedom. In 1941 he enrolled at the American College in Madurai and became active in the Student Federation, in which the Communist Party was very influential. At that point the Communists were very anti-British. However, after the German invasion of the USSR, Stalin proclaimed that the "imperialist war" had been transformed overnight into a "peoples' war" against fascism. Appanraj opposed the new pro-British line of the Communists, and that brought him to the attention of some radical Congressmen who were sympathetic to the Fourth International. They took this promising contact to meet the Ceylonese Trotskyist organizers from the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) who had been dispatched to Madurai to help form a Trotskyist party on the mainland. Appanraj found his calling. At the age of 19 he joined the BLPI. Given the government repression, the BLPI had to be clandestine from the start. Appanraj used the cover name, "Giri."

In August 1942 Gandhi made his famous "do or die" speech in Bombay, calling upon his countrymen to paralyze the

government and thereby force the British to "quit India." Faced with an imminent Japanese onslaught on India, the British were in no mood for conciliation. The government whisked Gandhi and the Congress high command off to jail. Riots erupted in Bombay and the revolt rolled across India. The panicked British government responded with mass repression. Like his comrades elsewhere, Appanraj went underground and attempted to give leadership to the anarchic upsurge. Though the BLPI program characterized Congress as "the party of the bourgeoisie," Appanraj had the good sense to collaborate closely with the radical Congressmen who were in the vanguard of the movement. Using a cyclostyle machine hidden in a nearby village, Appanraj produced revolutionary propaganda in the name of the BLPI.

Even though the BLPI was a tiny party, the government was determined to nip it in the bud. In 1943 the police, acting on information provided by the Stalinists and other spies, swooped down on the Trotskyists in Madurai, Madras, and Bombay. The BLPI was nearly crushed. But Appanraj escaped the roundup and, without telling even his parents, fled to Madras. He had no money. He roomed with a former classmate at the Tambaram Christian College Hostel. The BLPI group in Madras became his new "family." The Madras branch was ably led by the LSSP transplant, S.C.C. Anthony Pillai (1914–2000). Pillai became his political guru and a father figure to young Appanraj. He would remain devoted to Anthony Pillai for the rest of his life.

Appanra got a job as a record clerk in the Madras & Southern Mahratta Railways (MSM), a hotbed of militant nationalism. However, within a few months the police tracked him down, and after another close call he again had to pack his bag quickly and slip away, this time to Coimbatore, an industrial city in western Tamil Nadu. At the age of 21, he was leading the nerve-racking life of a revolutionary fugitive.

When the war ended, the BLPI surfaced to legality for the first time. That began a period of frenetic activity for young Appanraj. The BLPI sent him to Tuticorin in south Madras Province where the party had a group working in an important textile union. "I organized a strong party group in Tuticorin and started some trade unions," he wrote in one of his letters

to me, “and I was the president for them.” He led a textile strike. In 1946 he returned to Madurai and led another strike at the Mahalakshmi Textile Mills. This was rough and risky work. The working-class slums were rife with crime and every other social pathology that fester in such fetid pools of poverty.

Appanraj was a gifted orator. When the BLPI called public meetings, thousands attended. He recounted what happened when the Communist Party sent thugs to disrupt one of his meetings: “The cadres of the BLPI, though small in number, retaliated and started a hand-to-hand fight with the Communists. The sympathizers of the party also directly intervened. From the dais, I threw a challenge to the Stalinists that the BLPI would hold another meeting in a week and if they have guts let them come and break up the meeting.” He made good on that promise. That was the end of the Stalinist attacks.

Appanraj was also an effective recruiter. “I was a full-time party worker. I used to travel all over the District. At that time the BLPI was strong in the area around Bodi [Bodinayakanur]. Almost all the villages had BLPI units. In Thevaram we had such a strong unit that comrade Erulandi Thevar contested the election for president of the Panchayat Board and won.” During this period Appanraj also took leadership of a peasant union in Sholavandan, a town about 15 miles northwest of Madurai. “The landlords and police tried their best to break the strike but could not. We organized rallies and public meetings regularly. Finally, the government backed down.” Appanraj drew these peasant militants into the work of the party in Madurai. “I used to bring Peasant Union activists from Sholavandan to act as guards for our union meetings. In the dark night when I addressed the meetings, the swords that were brought by peasants would glitter under the lamps of the mill gate.”

The BLPI had its biggest success in Madras, where party cadres had made inroads into the labor movement during the war years, when the Stalinists opposed anything that would disrupt production for the war effort. In 1946 the Madras Labour Union, which represented the workers in the huge Buckingham and Carnatic Mills, elected BLPI leader Anthony Pillai president. In 1947 the union called a strike. The BLPI threw every available comrade into the struggle. Anticipating the inevitable repression, the Trotskyists formed a network of strike committees and a workers’ defense corps with 1,000 union men. For the next hundred days Appanraj and his comrades led militant marches through the streets of Madras, staged massive open-air support rallies, skirmished with the police, and kept the ranks firm in the face of repression and severe financial hardship. The red flag of the union fluttered defiantly everywhere in the city.

The BLPI emerged from that landmark labor battle with tremendous prestige. In 1948 Anthony Pillai and seven of his comrades contested the elections for the Madras Municipal Corporation (city council). All were elected. The Trotskyist bloc began to implement measures that benefited the working class, such as setting up the Municipal Maternity Hospital, establishing dispensaries, and building flats for slum dwellers. In 1948 Pillai was also elected president of the Madras Port Trust Employees’ Union and became a member of the general council of the All-India Trade Union Congress. The BLPI was on the road to becoming a mass-based revolutionary party in South India.

Meanwhile, the BLPI was embroiled in an internal debate that was to have far-reaching consequence. Some party members in Bombay proposed that the BLPI enter the Congress Socialist Party with the objective of building up a left wing and then exiting stronger than before. Appanraj was opposed to this “entry tactic.” He did not think that the Congress Socialist Party offered a fertile enough ground for recruitment to warrant the dissolution of the BLPI at a time when the party was poised to make progress. However, as the Congress Socialist Party grew rapidly during 1947-48, the entry faction gained ground. “To their favor,” Appanraj wrote, “the Congress Socialists exited the Congress and formed a separate party. They held their first conference at Madurai for three days, and on the final day their leader, Jayaprakash Narayan, addressed a mammoth public meeting which drew hundreds of thousands of people. No political leader except Mahatma Gandhi had pulled such a huge crowd. This indirectly convinced our cadres, who started to side with the pro-entry leaders in the BLPI. So my voice had gone with the wind.”

In late 1948 the BLPI formally folded into the Socialist Party. Appanraj, then only 25 years old, accepted the majority decision, though with apprehension. In one of his last letters to me, he described the dissolution of the BLPI as “a great tragedy.” Though he had opposed the entry, Appanraj tried his best to make it work. “Since I happened to be a good orator,” he wrote in his usual modest way, “I gained influence not only with the leadership but also with the rank and file.” Whenever one of the national party leaders toured Tamil Nadu, Appanraj went along to translate. “In all the towns thousands of people gathered in spite of the hot sun.” In 1951 he was appointed editor of the party weekly, *Samadharma Vathi* (Socialist Appeal).

In 1951 the Nehru government called the first general election since Independence. The Socialist leaders had high hopes that they could become the dominant opposition party. But Congress campaigned with its own socialist-sounding program, backed up by a vast grass-roots machine. The Congress won in a landslide. Even the Communist Party won more seats in

patient than the Socialists. Traumatized and demoralized, the Socialist leaders negotiated a hasty marriage of convenience with a group of dissident Congressmen to produce the Praja Socialist Party (PSP). Appanraj and his comrades appealed to the ranks to reject the merger and revitalize the Socialist Party on a more militant program. The ignominious collapse of the Socialist Party showed that Appanraj had been right in his opposition to the catty tactic in 1948.

The Trotskyists were the brains and the backbone of the rump Socialist Party. The Madras group produced the party newspaper, *Socialist Appeal*, on the printing press at the Madras Labour Union. When they held their first conference at Madurai on November 2, 1952, their erstwhile comrades in the PSP attacked the meeting hall. Appanraj recalled the incident. "We had long sticks which could be used for two purposes – one was to fly the flags, the other was for our safety. We lashed the attackers and many were wounded."

As the Trotskyists predicted, the PSP was doomed to unravel. In July 1955 Ram Manohar Lohia, an old Socialist warhorse, left the PSP and launched his own rival Socialist Party. He appealed for Socialist unity. Anthony Pillai and his group, including Appanraj, joined forces with Lohia. Appanraj became president of the Tamil Nadu organization. In 1956 he became editor of the Tamil edition of its journal, *Manvitha Kulan* (Mankind). His mentor, Anthony Pillai, became the leader of the Socialist Party in Parliament.

In the late 'fifties Ram Manohar Lohia went on a crusade to "abolish English" (the *Angrezi Hatao* movement). Wherever the merits, that demand didn't play well in Tamil Nadu and other states in South India where Hindi was every bit as "foreign" as English. "As Tamil Nadu Socialist Party President," Appanraj recounted to me, "I directly condemned Dr. Lohia's behavior. We held a party conference at Madurai. The party was split in two. We decided to continue our party as the 'Socialist Workers Party'."

In 1962 the Socialist Workers fielded seven candidates for the Madras Assembly. Every single one lost. The ruling Congress Party claimed to be carrying out a "revolution" in the social and economic relationships of India. Kamaraj, the Congress boss, invited all those who believed in socialism to return to the Congress fold. Some of the Socialists heeded his call. Appanraj wrote tersely: "Likewise, we like Socialists in Tamil

Nadu also joined Congress." He became general secretary of the South Madras District Congress Committee (1958-74), president of the Tamil Nadu National Trade Union Congress (1974-76), and general secretary of the Tamil Nadu Congress (1979-80).

Having devoted his entire adult life to politics, Appanraj was not financially secure. He had a wife and three children to support. In 1972 the government established the "Freedom Fighters' Pension" for Indians who had gone to jail or were fugitives in the long fight to oust the British. Appanraj applied, but the government rejected his application on the grounds that he could not prove that he had been an underground fighter. He appealed, and finally in 2003 the High Court in Madras ruled in his favor. He lived in retirement on that modest pension.

In the nineties some old BLPI veterans in Tamil Nadu got together and formed the Samadharma Hakkaiya Pannai (Socialist Publishing Society). Their goal was to publish Trotskyist literature in Tamil and in so doing muster the forces to "re-brand" the BLPI. Appanraj gladly volunteered to help his old comrades. He produced *Paratchi Pathai* (Way to Revolution), a translation of the book, *Rise and Fall of the Comintern*, by K. Tilak (Leslie Greenwendene), which the BLPI had published in 1947. He also wrote *Ayya unaiya Thoyizh sangha medai S.C.C. Anthony Pillai, vazhakai varuvaru* (The Fearless One: Biography of the Labour Leader, S.C.C., Anthony Pillai).

Reflecting on his life, I recall the oft-quoted lines from Wordsworth's poem about the French Revolution: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive! But to be young was very heaven!" Appanraj had the opportunity to participate in one of the most dramatic, momentous mass movements of the twentieth century. He felt the tremors of revolution during the convulsive Quit India revolt of 1942-43 and witnessed the power of the working class in the great Madras general strike of 1947. Thanks in no small part to his efforts, the BLPI in South India became a "proletarian party" in actual composition, not just in theory, and that is something that few Trotskyist parties have ever achieved.

Karupiah Appanraj deserves to be honored and remembered for what he was in his prime: a "soldier of the revolution" who bravely fought for socialism under the banner of the Fourth International. ■

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