

## MERYL FERNANDO 1923-2007

**M**eryl Fernando, the veteran Trotskyist died on 27 May 2007 at his home at Korawalwella, Moratuwa. He was in frail health for several months. He was 84.

He was born at Korawalwella, in the house built by his maternal uncle in 1908. Meryl recalled a story recounted by people in his neighbourhood that their house was surrounded by Punjabi (Indian) soldiers during the 1915 riots. His uncle who edited a Sinhala nationalist paper was taken to prison as were prominent nationalist leaders.

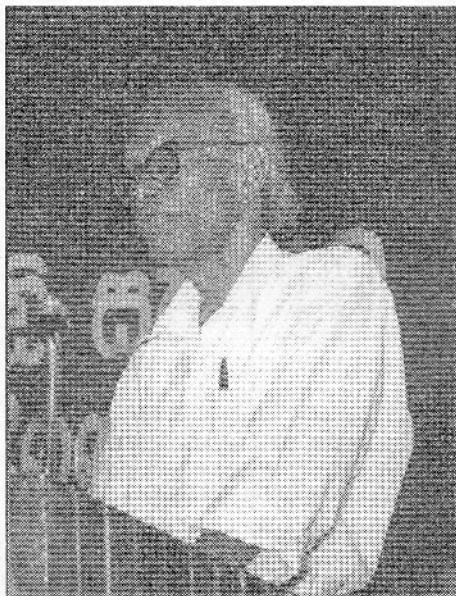
The son of Cornelius Fernando, a small shopowner-trader, and Mary Fernando, Meryl received his education at Prince of Wales College, Moratuwa. He entered the Colombo university in 1941; World War II was raging. Illness prevented him from sitting for the London intermediate examination. However, he prepared privately for this examination in economics and passed it in 1944. He later entered the Teachers'

Training College, Maharagama, where he qualified as a trained teacher.

His interest in politics began about 1942. He attended study classes conducted by Regi Siriwardena, at that time an LSSP activist. He also contacted Henry Peiris, a popular party educator who was doing underground political work. Meryl recalled that he attended a full-day study class by Henry for the Ratmalana railway workers. He joined the LSSP during the Second World War whilst still a university student. In the immediate postwar period he was active organizing match-factory workers in his hometown Moratuwa.

His elder brother Aloysius who had been associated with the LSSP since the late 1930s was a formative political influence. Henry Peiris (later LSSP MP for Panadura 1947-52) was another influence. In 1944 Meryl attended a secret conference of the party organized by the pro-BLP wing.

He was a member of the Moratuwa Urban Council for a period of fifteen years and was for a term its chairman. This was the first local council in which the LSSP was able to wrest power from the ruling UNP in 1951. Moratuwa, 12 miles south of Colombo, was a rising seaside township dotted with carpentry workshops. Monsoonal conditions affected fisherfolk who lived in cadjan-thatched mud and wattle huts. Rainstorms blew away their habitations. Deep-sea fishermen were unable to venture out even to eke out a precarious living. Likewise in-shore fishermen who were engaged in the casting and hauling of nets were also adversely affected. The Left-dominated urban council administration introduced relief measures.



In 1948 Meryl was successful in getting carpentry workers at Willorawatte, Moratuwa, to join the Industrial and General Workers' Union affiliated to the LSSP and submit demands. He and Doric de Souza made representations on behalf of the union. The management agreed to

grant an eight-hour working day, wages-board holidays with pay, overtime payments etc. This was the first time that carpentry workers employed in a workshop had won such demands.

In November 1945 the workers at the Elephant Match Factory at Kelaniya, came out on strike. Their demands were higher wages and an eight-hour working day. They sought the assistance of the BLP. Port workers in Colombo rallied to offer support and a demonstration of strikers marched from Peliyagoda to Pettah. Meryl tried to secure the support of the workers of the Lanka Light Match Factory, Moratuwa, but he and V. Karalasingham (Carlo) were not successful. The strike at the match factory at Kelaniya ended in a victory for the workers.

Later their efforts at the Moratuwa match factory bore fruit. In June 1946 the workers there joined the Kelaniya Match Workers' Union. On May 1 the Moratuwa match workers

struck work. The management refused to grant their demands and two workers were also dismissed. The strike lasted nine days and was called off when the management agreed to reinstate the two workers and refer the union's demands for arbitration.

Meryl was associated with the work of the Moratuwa branch of the Kelaniya Match Workers' Union for nearly two decades and served as secretary of the Moratuwa branch for several years. Meryl and Doric de Souza participated in committee meetings – the union committee used to meet almost once a week. Meryl and Doric also attended to representation work and Meryl to the day-to-day work. A carpentry worker, Allanson Fernando was one of the mourners who filed past Meryl's coffin at the Town Hall. He recalled that as a boy he had sought the latter's assistance when his father a fisherman died at sea. Meryl had expedited the post-mortem procedures and Allanson's family received compensation from the council. He was later associated with the youth league.

Meryl was arrested and jailed during the August 1953 hartal or protest campaign against drastic cutbacks on food and welfare spending by the ruling rightwing UNP. Meryl was detained for three weeks. Colvin R. de Silva appeared for him at the trial, as he did in over 50 such cases in various courts in the island. The charges were blatantly false and after two policemen gave evidence and were cross-examined by Colvin, Meryl was acquitted without the defence being called.

The hartal reached almost insurrectionary high points where the LSSP was strong, in Moratuwa in the hamlets of Egoda Uyana, Katukurunda and Korawella. Over 40 years later, Meryl published a reprint of Colvin's original pamphlet *Hartal*, with a new introduction by him, outlining the lessons of the tumultuous events. Meryl also addressed a public meeting at Moratuwa held to mark the hartal anniversary. He vividly recounted the turbulent events that shook the town.

In May 1960 when N.M. Perera proposed that the LSSP should form a coalition government with the SLFP, Meryl along with the left tendency in the party opposed the proposal at a special conference. On developments that followed Meryl wrote, "recognising that 'in the context of Sri Lankan politics, the attainment of power through a parliamentary election is a possibility', the leadership proceeded to form a United Left Front (ULF) in 1963 with the Communist Party and Philip Gunawardena's MEP."

"But when the government was seriously weakened in 1964 and its very existence became doubtful, and Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike prorogued parliament for four months and sought leftwing leaders in her government ..." the LSSP entered the government and the ULF broke up.

Meryl rejected the coalition perspective the LSSP followed in 1964, in 1970 and thereafter. In 1964 Meryl broke with the LSSP along with Edmund Samarakkody, Bala Tampoe, Prins Rajasooriya and others when the party joined the capitalist coalition government of Mrs. Sirima Bandaranaike, and he helped found the LSSP-R, and later the Revolutionary Workers Party (RWP). He represented the LSSP and later the LSSP-R as MP for Moratuwa from 1956 to 1964.

In the 1956 general election he made a stormy entry into parliament by beating into third place the sitting member, ex-LSSP and a leader of the Sinhala Bhasha Perumuna. The LSSP then adhered intransigently to its language policy of parity of status for Sinhala and Tamil as state languages. Its prestige was never higher.

He made rousing speeches in Sinhala; a parliamentary colleague used to tease him, about his 'takarang' voice, soaring in flights of oratory, he recalled in a self-deprecatory reminiscence. He spoke eloquently on the aspirations of workers and the oppressed and on the imperatives to radically transform society.

There is an anecdote about the riches he made on the stock exchange. One morning a group of pressmen called at his house. They broke the news about a large portfolio of shares he had acquired. It turned out that it was his namesake – a successful entrepreneur who had made an attractive investment on the stock exchange the previous day. A bemused Meryl told the journalists that let alone purchasing shares he could barely make ends meet.

There is another tale of mistaken identity. In 1960 Robert Gunawardena defected from the LSSP to join his brother Philip, leader of the MEP. He received a congratulatory telegram and he rushed to Moratuwa to thank Meryl. He was disappointed to learn that the sender was the latter's namesake (who spelt his first name with a slight difference).

With his defeat at the hustings in 1965 Meryl braced himself for the long haul – the uphill task of pursuing principled politics. Meryl continued to intervene in class and social struggles. He stoutly adhered to the defence of working-class independence against all varieties of political

opportunism. Meryl also contributed articles on political topics to the *Revolutionary History* and *What Next?* published in London, and the local press. On his last visit to London in 1999 he met for the first time the late Al Richardson and several comrades of his *Revolutionary History* team.

He undertook stints as a part-time university English teacher, and after passing three parts of a management accountancy examination worked for a period as a bookkeeper at the Moratuwa University.

We recall his final intervention in parliament in December 1964. It was a courageous reaffirmation of socialist and secular principles in the teeth of retrogressive attempts by the ruling United Front government to undermine them. He had moved an amendment to the Throne Speech (programme presented at the beginning of a parliamentary term) of the short-lived United Front government. His amendment drew attention to the coalition government's basically anti-working-class and chauvinist policies. He added that the government had abandoned the fundamental democratic principle of a secular state. Before his own amendment came up for a vote the government was defeated.

Some two decades after he had commenced his pioneering work in his hometown organizing workers in unions, workers

in a leading garment factory began a gruelling battle to gain recognition for their union as well as increased wages. In the aftermath of the LSSP's entry into the coalition government in 1964 the factory workers had high expectations. It turned out that their illusions about the new government quickly evaporated. The workers then turned to Meryl for assistance to build an effective union.

The strike received publicity and sympathizers rallied a round to help. Several public meetings were organized. Finally the management agreed to reinstate the dismissed union activists. When they arrived at the gates they were shut out. The management reneged on its undertaking.

Meryl was a modest and unassuming man. A lanky figure, he would travel to Colombo by bus or train for party meetings. He did not own a motor car.

His remains were taken to the Town Hall, Moratuwa, on 29 May to enable the public to pay their respects. Meryl's close comrade Tulsiri Andradi delivered the funeral oration. The Mayor of Moratuwa, Sunimal Fernando, in a tribute to Meryl referred to his services to the people of the town. The burial took place at the General Cemetery, Rawatawatte, Moratuwa.

Farewell Comrade Meryl!

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