A Fraternal Message to Comrade Bala Tampoe and the Ceylon Mercantile Union

In the history of the left both internationally and locally, a critical appraisal of organisations and their leaders are rare occurrences. For many of the comrades on the left there are no grey areas in politics. Like mathematics it has to be black or white. However, the stark reality is that in politics like the legal sphere, there are so many shades of grey (and also grey matter sometimes). It was over these shades of grey that left has made it into an art form, with the left continually fragmenting into various factions and denominations. This holds true from the old to the young. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that all left wing and progressive sections of the working people in Sri Lanka will with enthusiasm positively appraise the tremendous and significant role played by the Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU - The Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union formed in 1928) and its leader comrade Bala Tampoe in the national political history of Sri Lanka and its people. Comrade Bala is in his eightieth year and the CMU in its sixtieth. Both the man and the organisation are synonymous. As Bala had been general secretary of the CMU for the past sixty years!

Since 1948 Bala has been general secretary of the CMU, a strong trade union in the mercantile sector initially affiliated with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). In the sixties as a student wing member of the Communist Party, I was told that all Trotskyite movements were backed by the CIA including comrade Bala! This line was continued in the JVP but later on repudiated. Regardless of these rumours, we young people had a high regard for the militant struggles led by the LSSP and the CP, and the role the CMU and its leader comrade Bala played in the struggle for socialism and the rights of the working class. The CMU led strikes in the sixties despite the repression of the state which was inspiring to us of the left.

However, with the marriage of the left leadership with bourgeois parties, there were new tendencies that came into being. Comrade Bala broke away and formed the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Revolutionary) and the comrades who had closer associations with the Communist parties went onto strengthen the ‘movement’, a breakaway group from the Maoist currents, which later was identified as the 'Che Guevara movement' and afterwards became the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Comrade Bala became the leader of the political group recognised by the United Secretariat of the Fourth International.

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. It was the same situation in 1971 and 1972. 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.

1 In the seventies, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Revolutionary) changed its name to Revolutionary Marxist Party (RMP).
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. A plethora of legal counsels with different views on how to proceed in facing the CJC trial represented the 32 defendants that were in custody. There were two views: the majority felt that the CJC had no legal jurisdiction to hold the trial and that the CJC Act had no force in Law. They wished to raise this issue at the commencement of the trial and failing to succeed to walk out of the CJC. Comrade Bala and his team comprising Comrades R Saravanabhagawan, P Rajanayagam and H A Seneviratne and several other legal representatives went beyond this. Not only they 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. When the CJC came to the view that the Act was valid in law, comrades Edmund Samarakkody, his team, Prins Gunesekera and several other counsels walked out 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. For most of us in the JVP, it was our first encounter with the law and we were convinced that comrade Bala and his team were correct in their position because the CJC trial was not just a legal matter but predominantly a political matter. It was on a decision made by the CMU that Comrade Bala and the team appeared on behalf of or advised us, the accused of the main trial. Thereafter, throughout the main trial, comrades Rohana Wijeweera, 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. Some in the JVP changed their political stripes while others left the political fray for personal reasons.

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. The metaphor was apt for me, at the time, because the crisis in the JVP had ensured that the deadwood had drifted away to allow new shoots to flourish. The political collaboration between the JVP and the CMU became visible when the JVP took part in a United Red May Day rally in 1977 with the CMU. When the JVP leadership was released from prison in November 1977, we had only one shelter to go to and that was the CMU office in Colpetty. On that happy day we met many CMU comrades, held our first press conference at the CMU headquarters and embarked on a political campaign that gave rise to post-1977 JVP. It was at this press conference we appealed for a party office, which was later established at Weerasinghe Saw Mills in Bloemendhal Road, Colombo.
I recollect comrade Bala teasingly calling us ‘Little Lenins’, implying that we knew only a little of Lenin. We continued to have friendly political arguments with him despite this. We raised issues like the Trotskyite movement not carrying out political activities among the peasantry. Comrade Bala countered this and tried to convince us that this was not the case anymore citing the example of comrade Hugo Blanco, an insurgent leader of a peasant uprising in Peru. The CMU and its comrades did not brand us as terrorists just because we reacted offensively to the political and military repression of the state. Comrade Bala also displayed an extremely good understanding of religions. He was born a Christian, I do not know of what faith. He respected all religious leaders in saying that they were all human beings looking for responses to human issues and cited many examples from Dhamma and the Bible.

Comrade Bala also used to narrate his life story to us. He thought that it was his personal nature and commitment to fairness and justice that brought him along the path of the working class struggle. It was Comrade Bala’s exclusion based on his nationality to a famous English school in India that had probably impacted his life making him to strongly support the anti-colonial struggle of the day. He had become a Marxist in his university days and got involved in the anti-war campaign. His first foray into politics was when he made his first public speech at a general strike in 1947. His active support to the general strike and the working class struggle led to his dismissal from the public service. From that point onwards without any reservation he dedicated his life to the struggle of the working people.

We continued to maintain good working political relationships with the CMU and its leadership. There were strike campaigns and political and agitational campaigns we launched together. I particularly recollect in the early eighties 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. Some leaders of the Socialist Workers Union, the trade union wing of the JVP, had planned to cheer comrade Rohana Wijeweera when he stepped on to the stage. Many of us in the JVP leadership did not know about this. When he walked on to the stage, the JVP cadres who made up the bulk of the audience cheered. At the time comrade Bala was addressing the crowd. It was a sheer coincidence. Naturally, comrade Bala was annoyed and said few things about the incident. In turn comrade Rohana went onto respond to him during his speech. This marked a decline of support for the collective campaign within the JVP. 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.

Comrade Bala is not only a revolutionary politician and a radical trade unionist, he was and still continues to be a charismatic national political leader. He is an active participant in social, economic and human rights issues affecting the country and its people. Whenever the human and/or democratic rights of the people were under threat or violated, comrade Bala was at the forefront making the masses aware of the situation and challenging the state and demanding with passion an end to such violations. In the seventies while we were behind bars, comrades Bala and Prins Gunesekera got together to form a human and democratic rights organisation and campaigned for our release. The CMU and comrade Bala has been consistent in not supporting anyone of the presidential candidates as all the presidential candidates

3 This epiphany was similar to Comrade Rohana. He was profoundly moved by the physical assault on his father which made his father a cripple. He was bed-ridden for the rest of his life.
elections were held under the 1978 constitution. The CMU has continuously resisted efforts to weaken labour laws or to prevent May Day events from taking place. It has endeavoured to unify public and private sector workers in the island. This was also evident with comrade Bala’s participation in the campaign against phosphate mining in Eppawala and his personal representation at major international forums and tribunals.

Comrade Bala and the CMU have been consistent champions of all the working people and the oppressed irrespective of their racial, linguistic or religious backgrounds. During the tsunami disaster, the CMU requested the LTTE to give prominence to the needs of tsunami victims in the north and east and work in consultation with the government, while requesting the government to administer relief and rehabilitation work with the cooperation of the LTTE which had military and administrative control over large parts of tsunami affected areas. He insisted the relief effort should be planned and equitable to all the effected provinces. The RMP, the CMU and comrade Bala opposed the government policy of inequitable treatment of people on the grounds of race, language and religion and advocated regional autonomy for Tamil speaking people as a just solution to the national question. The JVP lest we forget also advocated regional autonomy till 1984. The CMU and comrade Bala have continued to condemn the killings by all sides to the current conflict and are at pains to emphasise that even if the LTTE gained control of the North and the East, a separate state could not be formed without the consent of the international community including India. At the same time they have pointed out how the anti-terror laws of the island have contributed to the steady growth of rebellions, anti-government activities and national disunity.

I was pleased to report from my recent conversations with comrade Bala that he has not changed his political views one bit. He maintains his red credentials despite many of his erstwhile colleagues joining the ranks or supporting the ruling elite. He is the driving force influencing the CMU to take just and fair stands with regard to many national political issues. As a revolutionary at heart I appreciate it that he has never wavered from his uncompromising class positions. Yet, with capitalism in its globalisation phase adopting neo-liberal strategies and tactics for its global domination, it is necessary that organisations like the CMU and leaders like comrade Bala to take a long and hard look regarding the practice, organisation and delegation of work.

In any organisation succession is vital for its vitality. Young cadres need to take over leadership roles. Comrade Bala can play a vital role in this. Given his sixty years of experience at the helm, he can impart his skills experience and radical political fidelity to the younger generation while the younger cadres can inject new blood, vigour and new ideas and thus prepare the CMU for the challenges of the 21st century globalised market economy. At its sixtieth anniversary the CMU needs to take a hard look at itself while adopting a positive and constructive approach and needs to ask the question wherein lies the future of the CMU.

The CMU fought for the autonomy of unions and organised workers to fight against any attempt to submit them the whims of the bourgeoisie. They also fought for the workers’ control of the working-class movement. The CMU was and is independent and able to fearlessly express its views and take action on human and democratic rights violations. The strength of the CMU will continue to depend on its membership and the quality of their leadership.

Thus it is vital for the CMU to build a new generation of trade unionists not only to support the rights of the workers but also be a centre for the advocation of social justice. This discussion and transition is vital. It will be a debate about how to rebuild the CMU and will raise many questions which need to be discussed openly, publicly, and with complete honesty.
The CMU has to produce leaders who could succeed in their day to day struggles while adhering to the democratic and legitimate traditions it has upheld since its inception.

Comrade Bala at eighty is still young at heart; the fire brand radical; uncompromising with the bourgeoisie; and still conducting negotiations on behalf of the workers and the working class. In 1983, after the defeats in the presidential election and the referendum comrade Bala said this: "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." I believe this stands very true in the current social, economic and political context.

When we were released from prisons in November 1977, Comrade Rohana Wijeweera and I personally and publicly thanked comrades Bala Tampoe, P Rajanayagam and H A Seneviratne and the CMU for their continued and determined assistance when we most needed it while we were behind bars. And I would like to take this opportunity to express our fraternal gratitude and heartfelt thanks to the CMU and its comrades for the genuine class assistance extended to the JVP in the seventies.

I conclude by personally thanking Comrade Bala and the members of the CMU for their positive role they have jointly played in the post war history of the island. It would be remiss of me not to mention the late comrade May Wickremasooriya who was personally committed to defending the JVP youth. She firmly supported her husband comrade Bala in his more than full time work in doing this.

Your services to the working people will never be forgotten. Your dedication, loyalty and devotion to the cause of the working class and the people will remain in our hearts forever and provide us with inspiration to continue on the path you have set through your exemplary life.

I have no doubt that those who were in the JVP in the seventies and early eighties will join me in congratulating and extending our warmest fraternal greetings to comrade Bala, the CMU and its membership. Whatever happened in terms of political and trade union history, you have shown by example, the significance of a working class that remains cohesive and united despite divisive norms and rules imposed from without.

I also take this great occasion to wish longevity to comrade Bala Tampoe and the CMU in their determined and continued effort to bring justice, fairness and equity to the people in Sri Lanka.

With fraternal greetings
Lionel Bopage
Former General Secretary of the JVP

01 February 2008