

Public meeting in Australia condemns LTTE arrest of Sri Lankan socialists

Our Reporters**9 September 1998**

A meeting of workers, young people, housewives and pensioners organised by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) in the Melbourne working class suburb of Dandenong voted unanimously on September 7 to condemn the arrest of three Tamil socialists by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and to demand their immediate and unconditional release.

Thirungnana Sambandan and Kasinathan Naguleshwaran were arrested on July 26 in the LTTE-controlled Kilinochchi district in northern Sri Lanka while putting up posters. A week later Rajendran Sudarshan was arrested at his home. All three are members of the Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Sue Phillips, the SEP Senate candidate for Victoria, who chaired the meeting, said the LTTE had refused to make any public comment on the whereabouts or health of the three socialists. The LTTE's silence and its record of using violence against its political opponents were cause for grave concern about the safety and lives of the arrested SEP members.

She said the meeting was part of an international campaign being waged by the International Committee for their release. Hundreds of letters and faxes had been sent from around the world to the LTTE's offices in London. Demonstrations and meetings had been held in the Indian city of Madras and in Sri Lanka. In Melbourne, scores of teachers, students and workers had signed petitions.

Peter Symonds, a member of the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board, told the meeting the LTTE's arrest of the SEP members was a fundamental attack on democratic rights. The LTTE official in charge of the Kilinochchi district, Theepan, had told relatives of Sambandan and Naguleshwaran he had ordered the

arrests because the SEP's politics had become an obstacle to the LTTE's activities.

Symonds explained that two irreconcilably opposed perspectives were at stake. The political objective of the LTTE was the establishment of a separate capitalist statelet in the north and east of Sri Lanka. Its program did not serve the interests of the Tamil masses but those of a tiny petty bourgeois layer offering their services to international investors to exploit the cheap labour of the Tamil working class.

Like other bourgeois nationalist organisations such as the ANC in South Africa and the PLO in the Middle East, the LTTE had increasingly abandoned any defence of the rights of the Tamil people and resorted to the most repressive means against its political opponents.

Symonds said the SEP had been targeted because its internationalist perspective was in direct opposition to the nationalism of the LTTE. "The SEP seeks as part of the International Committee to unify the Sinhalese and Tamil workers with their class brothers and sisters throughout the Indian sub-continent and internationally to abolish the capitalist system, which is the real source of their oppression."

The speaker detailed the historical roots of the brutal war waged against the Tamil population by the Sri Lankan government. From the outset, the SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League, had consistently opposed the war. The SEP had a long record of championing the rights of Tamils, not only in the north and east, but in the capital Colombo and in the tea plantations.

Moreover, the SEP had been the only party to oppose the Peoples Alliance government of Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga, which had not only resumed the war but mounted serious attacks on workers and

youth in the south of the country as well.

The speaker emphasised the need to continue and intensify the campaign for the release of Sambandan, Naguleshwaran and Rajendran, as the latest information indicated that the LTTE was now extending its political repression to other SEP members in the area.

In the course of the discussion, a Sri Lankan member of the audience said the war had been instigated by outside interests in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, who had funded and provided arms to the LTTE. Prior to that, he said, there had been no problems between Tamils and Sinhalese.

Symonds explained the origins of the conflict in Sri Lanka. Right from the granting of formal independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan ruling class resorted to racism, like the British colonialists, to divide the working class and consolidate their rule. One of the first acts of the Sri Lankan government was introduce a citizenship act that disenfranchised thousands of Tamil tea estate workers. In the 1950s, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) based itself openly on Sinhalese chauvinism, calling for Sinhala to be made the sole official language and for the repatriation of Tamil estate workers.

To the degree that these policies had been opposed by the former Trotskyist party—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP)—there had been a class unity between Tamil and Sinhalese workers. But in 1964, the LSSP betrayed the principles of socialist internationalism by joining the SLFP government of Prime Minister Bandaranaike and assisted in suppressing a widespread movement of the working class. This betrayal was to have profound consequences for the working class in Sri Lanka and throughout the region.

He said the LTTE was able to gain influence among Tamils who no longer saw a unified working class movement as a means for defending themselves against the increasingly ferocious attacks on their democratic rights. The LSSP was a part of the SLFP government which in the early 1970s amended the constitution to make Sinhala the official language and Buddhism the state religion. The war that erupted after the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom in Colombo emerged as a result of the racialist perspective of successive Sri Lankan governments and the betrayal of the LSSP.

After the meeting, Derrick Solomons, a former Sri Lankan railway worker, commented: “The whole

purpose of your organisation is honourable. You are fighting contrary to the ideas of the LTTE, which is fighting for separation. What you are doing shows you are united in getting international recognition for the release of people who have been taken innocently. They are not criminals, why should they be taken by the LTTE or the government? You are fighting for a legitimate cause.”

Opatha Pereira, also originally from Sri Lanka, explained why he voted for the resolution. “It’s a good cause. People should support it. The LTTE wants to set up a capitalist regime—they are not for the ordinary person. Your organisation wants to bring about a situation where everybody is equal, without the class system.”



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