

Australian SEP demands reversal of ban on Tamil socialist

13 January 1999

The Socialist Equality Party of Australia has sent the following letter to the Australian government formally protesting the government's refusal to grant Tamil socialist Rajendiram Sutharsan a temporary visa to visit the country to take part in the party's summer educational school, public meetings and other political discussions. The SEP is demanding that this decision be reversed immediately to allow Sutharsan and Australian working people to exercise their political and democratic rights to engage in international discussion.

The letter has been addressed to Philip Ruddock, who, as Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, has the political responsibility for the decision taken to exclude Sutharsan. The SEP of Australia has also written asking for support from all those organisations, trade unions and individuals who participated in the international campaign last July, August and September to demand the release of Sutharsan and three other Tamil members of the SEP of Sri Lanka from detention by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on labour and human rights organisations, and all groups and individuals concerned with the defence of democratic rights--in Australia, Sri Lanka and internationally--to protest in the strongest terms the ban on Sutharsan, and to demand that he be allowed to enter Australia. The addresses to which messages should be sent are listed below the SEP letter.

13 January 1999

Philip Ruddock

Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir,

The Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, protests in the strongest possible terms the government's decision to reject the application of Mr Rajendiram Sutharsan for a temporary visa to enter Australia.

We demand that this decision be reversed so that Mr

Sutharsan and those in Australia who wish to meet him and hear him speak can exercise their fundamental democratic rights to engage in political discussion.

Mr Sutharsan is a member of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka. Last September 13, an international defence campaign succeeded in freeing him and three other Tamil members of the Sri Lankan SEP from detention by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Mr Sutharsan had been held in captivity for almost 50 days.

The purpose of his visit was to attend the SEP's summer educational school, then remain for two weeks to discuss with workers and young people his detention by the LTTE and thank those in Australia who helped secure his release.

Mr Sutharsan's exclusion is not only an infringement of his political and democratic rights but of those of the organisations, workers and other individuals in Australia that supported the campaign for his freedom and have indicated a desire to discuss his experiences with him.

The government's decision sets a new precedent. It is the first time that a representative from Sri Lanka has been barred from participating in political activities organised by the SEP of Australia or its predecessor, the Socialist Labour League.

The SEP only received final notification of the government's decision via the Australian High Commission in Colombo at 5.30pm on December 31, 1998, whereupon your department's offices closed for three days. This made it impossible for the SEP to demand the reversal of the decision in time for Sutharsan to take part in the educational school.

In her initial written decision on December 30, Ms Jan Cleland, second secretary (immigration) in the Colombo High Commission, gave as the sole reason Mr Sutharsan's alleged failure to prove that the intended visit was genuine. She wrote that he had not satisfied the government's requirement that he demonstrate a commitment to return to Sri Lanka.

Yet Ms Cleland refused to reverse the decision a day later, after the SEP provided 25 pages of documents that detailed his imprisonment by the LTTE and his release as a result of

the international campaign. This campaign, conducted through the *World Socialist Web Site*, won the support of human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as parliamentarians, political figures, trade union leaders, artists, intellectuals and many others in Sri Lanka and around the world. In Australia, they included the Amalgamated Manufacturing Workers Union, the NSW Teachers Union and the Australian Education Union.

In an accompanying letter the SEP explained, precisely as requested by Ms Cleland, the purpose of Mr Sutharsan's visit, as well as his background, association with the party and arrangements for an interpreter to assist the discussions. Representatives of both the SEP in Australia and its sister party in Sri Lanka guaranteed his return to Sri Lanka.

Despite this, Ms Cleland insisted that Mr Sutharsan presented "an unacceptably high risk" to the Australian community, on the grounds that he might not return to Sri Lanka. Ms Cleland could not explain what else Mr Sutharsan could do to prove he intended to return to Sri Lanka. She also sought to justify this decision by claiming that it was "in the interests of consistent decision making"--indicating that many Sri Lankan Tamils have been refused visitor's visas as a matter of policy.

It became apparent that working class Tamils who do not possess wealth and business connections have virtually no chance of satisfying the burden of proof placed on visa applicants to demonstrate that they will not remain in Australia. Immigration officials gave similar reasons for the initial refusal of visas for the world-renowned Thang Long Water Puppet Troupe of Hanoi to perform at the Sydney Festival. Thus a blanket exclusion appears to apply to all Asian countries whose residents are classified as "risk factors".

Mr Sutharsan's exclusion, however, cannot be explained purely by this underlying discrimination on the basis of race and economic status. Ms Cleland's refusal to reverse the decision, despite being provided with detailed evidence of Mr Sutharsan's commitment to return to Sri Lanka, points to political discrimination as well.

In Sri Lanka the Socialist Equality Party has a well-known and unique record of opposing both the Sri Lankan government's war against the Tamil people in the north and west of the island and the LTTE's separatism. It fights for the unity of the working class, Sinhala and Tamil-speaking alike, on the basis of a socialist program. Mr Sutharsan's exclusion has the effect of preventing that view being made available to Australian workers, youth and intellectuals.

It is preposterous to claim that having withstood imprisonment and interrogation at the hands of the LTTE because of the firmness of his political convictions, Mr

Sutharsan would now repudiate his beliefs and role as an SEP leader, together with his commitments to his wife and three children in Sri Lanka. As a result of his release, Mr Sutharsan is now a widely-known political figure in Sri Lanka, particularly among Tamil people. For him to illegally overstay his visa in Australia would clearly undermine the victory for democratic rights represented by his release and harm the credibility of the International Committee of the Fourth International in the eyes of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The SEP and the ICFI intend to make the facts of the government's political censorship and racist discrimination known worldwide and to mount an intensive campaign for the reversal of the decision.

Yours sincerely,
Linda Tenenbaum
Assistant National Secretary
Socialist Equality Party
CC: Alexander Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Australian High Commission, Colombo

Letters, faxes and e-mails should be sent to:

Philip Ruddock
Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs
Suite MF40

Parliament House
Canberra 2600, Australia
Fax: 61-2-6273-4144

Alexander Downer
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra 2600, Australia
E-mail: minister.downer@dfat.gov.au
Fax: 61-2-6273-4112

Australian High Commission
PO Box 742
Colombo, Sri Lanka
E-mail: austcom@sri.lanka.net
Fax: 94-1-682-311

Please send copies of all statements of protest to the *World Socialist Web Site* at:

E-mail: editor@wsws.org
Fax: (Australia) 61-2-9790-3511



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact