Australian authorities silent on exclusion of Tamil socialist

Linda Tenenbaum
23 January 1999

Australian immigration authorities have so far failed to acknowledge, let alone reply to, any of the letters, faxes and emails sent from around the world, protesting the government's denial of a visitor's visa to Tamil socialist Rajendiram Sutharsan.

Sutharsan, a member of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, was one of four members of the party to be arrested and detained by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam for nearly two months last year. An international defence campaign conducted through the *World Socialist Web Site* succeeded in securing their release. The campaign won the support of human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as parliamentarians, political figures, trade union leaders, civil rights lawyers, artists 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 (Victorian Branch).

Sutharsan was invited to visit Australia by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) to attend an educational seminar in early January, and to address meetings in Melbourne and Sydney on his detention, providing him with an opportunity to thank those who helped secure his release.

The decision to bar his entry was made by the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka, on the grounds that he presented "an unacceptably high risk" to the "Australian community" because he might not return to Sri Lanka.

On January 13, an official letter from the SEP (Australia), sent to the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Philip Ruddock protested Sutharsan's exclusion "in the strongest possible terms". It drew out that the government's decision was part of a racialist and highly discriminatory policy aimed at the automatic exclusion of
"working class Tamils who do not possess wealth and business connections", and who therefore have "virtually no chance of satisfying the burden of proof placed on visa applicants to demonstrate that they will not remain in Australia."

The *WSWS* has since discovered that this policy extends to intending visitors from 37 countries, most of them Asian-Pacific, but also including South American, Middle Eastern and Eastern European.

In Sutharsan's case, however, other--political--factors also come into play. Even when the SEP provided officials with 25 pages of documentation, detailing his imprisonment by the LTTE and the international campaign to release him as well as information concerning his political and personal commitments in Sri Lanka, and an official guarantee that he would return, the High Commission refused to reverse its decision.

The SEP's letter pointed out that the government's position constituted an infringement, not only of Sutharsan's own political and democratic rights, but of all those in Australia who wished to hear him speak, and discuss his experiences.

"In Sri Lanka the SEP has a well-known and unique record of opposing both the Sri Lankan govenrment's war against the Tamil people in the north and east 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."

The letter went on: "It is preposterous to claim that having withstood imprisonment and interrogation at the

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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."

While no response has been forthcoming from the government, opposition to its position is mounting. Hundreds of Australian workers, many of them immigrants, have signed petitions, demanding that the decision be reversed, joining the protests sent by students, workers, civil rights lawyers and others from Europe, the US, New Zealand and Australia.

On Wednesday, Peter McClelland, New South Wales State President of the Construction and General Division of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union wrote in a letter to Ruddock that his union was "disturbed at the decision of the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka in refusing a temporary visa to Rajendiram Sutharsan. As we understand the situation, the visa was refused on the grounds of fears that Sutharsan would not return to Sri Lanka.

"Given the credibility damage that such an action would cause to the political organisation that Sutharsan represents, we regard a visa refusal based on such grounds to be highly dubious. Accordingly, we request the government reconsider the decision and allow Sutharsan to present his political ideas, the purpose of his visit, to whoever may be interested."

Federal Labor MP, Martin Ferguson, Member for Batman in Melbourne's northern suburbs, and Shadow Minister for Employment, Training, Population and Immigration, wrote to the Minister for Immigration requesting further information on a decision "which, on the face of it, should be reversed."

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges labour and human rights organisations and all groups and individuals concerned with the defence of democratic rights--in Sri Lanka, Australia and internationally--to join in the condemnation of the Australian government for its denial of Sutharsan's visa and to demand that he be allowed to enter the country.

Letters, faxes and emails 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) 61-2-9790-3501

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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