

Unions protest Australian government ban on Tamil socialist

Linda Tenenbaum
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The Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Plantation and Industrial Workers Union of Sri Lanka (PIWU) have called on the Australian High Commission in Colombo to reverse its decision barring Tamil socialist Rajendiram Sutharsan from entering Australia.

Sutharsan was invited by the Socialist Equality Party of Australia to attend its summer educational school, and to subsequently address meetings in Melbourne and Sydney on his recent 50-day detention by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Together with three other members of the SEP, Sutharsan was only released after an extensive international campaign waged through the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The High Commission rejected Sutharsan's application for a visitor's visa on December 30, on the grounds that he may not return to Sri Lanka. Despite being provided with a 25 page submission by the SEP (Australia) documenting the campaign for his release, as well as his political and personal commitments in Sri Lanka and an official guarantee that he would return, the High Commission refused to change its position.

The AEU represents some 150,000 pre-school, primary and secondary teachers across the country, as well as 15,000 technical college (TAFE) teachers. Written by federal president Sharan Burrow on January 17, the union's letter of protest was signed on behalf of the presidents of the Victorian, Tasmanian, Queensland, South Australian, Northern Territory, Western Australian and Australian Capital Territory branches, and the secretary of the New South Wales branch, who all personally endorsed its contents.

The letter stated: "The AEU Federal Executive protests the decision by the Australian High Commission to reject Rajendiram Sutharsan's application for a temporary visa to attend a summer educational school in Australia.

"Sutharsan has been invited to attend the summer school to speak about the general political issues facing working

people in Sri Lanka and his own recent experiences of being arrested and detained for two months by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1998.

"The Government's refusal to overturn this decision on the grounds of failure to prove that the intended visit is genuine is rejected, as adequate information about the background and purpose of the visit has been provided. Information has also been provided to satisfy the Australian High Commission that there is not an unacceptably high risk of Sutharsan remaining in Australia after his visit.

"The failure by the Government to provide cogent arguments in the face of the evidence provided, points to a political motivation for the decision.

"The AEU calls on the Government to reverse the decision and allow Sutharsan to enter Australia and exercise his political and democratic rights."

The general secretary of the PIWU, W. A. Sunil wrote to the Australian High Commission in Colombo that, according to the information received by the union, "we cannot see any justifiable reason for your refusal of the visa application submitted by Sutharsan. We therefore consider it to be motivated by racial discrimination. It is a violation of the basic democratic right of the international working class to engage in free discussion. In the final analysis, we consider that the visa rejection is, in this case, due to the present immigration policy of the Australian government.

"We strongly denounce your government's policy as harmful to the interests not only of the working class in Sri Lanka and Australia but internationally. We also request that you lift the ban on R. Sutharsan and grant him a temporary visa to meet with his co-thinkers in Australia."

In a letter to the Australian High Commissioner, Sri Lankan member of parliament, Vasudeva Nanayakkara, MP for the Ratnapura District, characterised the visa

rejection as "unreasonable". He then declared: "This letter intends to convey to you my disappointment with your decision and I wish to state that this is an improper and depressing gesture on your part in view of the nature and purpose of the visit Mr Sutharsan was to undertake."

Letters, faxes and emails condemning the Australian authorities' decision have been sent from individuals and organisations in Europe, Japan, the US, New Zealand, Australia and Sri Lanka. Petitions demanding that Sutharsan be immediately granted a visa have also been signed by hundreds of workers, youth and housewives in Australia. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges all those concerned with the defence of democratic rights to join in raising the demand that Sutharsan be allowed to enter Australia.

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:

wsws.org/contact