

WSWS interviews barred Tamil socialist

"My exclusion is a serious attack on the democratic rights of both Sri Lankan and Australian workers"

Linda Tenenbaum
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Tamil socialist, Rajendiram Sutharsan has spoken out against the decision by the Australian government to deny him entry into Australia. In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), he denounces his exclusion as a "serious attack on democratic rights" and points to the highly political considerations underlying it.

On December 30, 1998 the Australian High Commission in Colombo rejected Sutharsan's visa application, citing concerns that he would fail to return to Sri Lanka. Sutharsan, a member of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, had been invited by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) to visit the country in order to attend a summer educational school, and to provide him with the opportunity to address public meetings on his recent 50-day detention by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Together with three other members of the SEP, Sutharsan was only released after an extensive international campaign waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) through the WSWS.

The High Commission maintained its position despite 25 pages of documentation detailing Sutharsan's detention and the campaign to release him, as well as his personal and political commitments in Sri Lanka.

The WSWS began by asking Sutharsan what his reaction was when he was informed that his visa application had been denied.

"In my application, I explained that my trip was being sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party in Australia, and I provided the High Commission with the SEP's letter of invitation. I also gave them a letter from the Sri Lankan SEP that expressed pleasure at the invitation. Both letters guaranteed my return to Sri Lanka.

"During the interview, there were no disputes. No problems were raised with me. By rejecting the visa application, the High Commission officials have discredited both organisations. I consider this a serious attack on the democratic rights of workers in the two countries."

Sutharsan explained that the official who had interviewed him said the rejection was due to "present political conditions".

"But what are these political conditions? Thousands of people have migrated from Sri Lanka because of the conditions created by the present racist war against the Tamils. The North and East are engulfed in war. That is why thousands of people--students, professionals and workers--have made applications to migrate. In these cases, the various High Commissions and embassies require

them to submit guarantees from their direct blood relations."

Sutharsan's application, however, was not to migrate, but simply to visit Australia for a few weeks. "My case is completely different. And I was invited by a well known Australian political party, affiliated to a world party, the ICFI."

Behind the decision, Sutharsan pointed out, were definite political motivations. "The Australian regime has expressed their readiness to play the role of mediator in the crisis the Colombo regime faces in relation to its ongoing war. Simply put, this means playing the role of a power broker between the Peoples Alliance regime and the LTTE. This is what the LTTE calls a 'third party intervention'. At the moment there is ongoing competition between various leading imperialist countries--Australia, Canada, Britain and Norway--over who will play this role, and in that way, grab the biggest advantage for their investments in this country.

"We have ceaselessly stated that there are no shortcut solutions to the Tamil question. There is only a working class solution. The Australian government does not want to allow any kind of discussion on the basis of a socialist program."

The WSWS asked Sutharsan about the purpose of his visit. He replied that he had been eager to come to Australia for a number of reasons. "First of all, I was keen to take part in the SEP's educational school, which is attended by many co-thinkers from around the world. It is held annually and is a truly international gathering, with discussion on the international political situation. It is the first time I have been invited to such an international event.

"Secondly, this would have been a good opportunity to personally express my gratitude, on behalf of the SEP in Sri Lanka, to all those comrades who worked tirelessly to obtain our release from the LTTE's captivity. Moreover, there are many other organisations and individuals in Australia who came forward to join the international campaign and who deserve our sincere thanks."

Thirdly, he explained, he wanted to discuss the political situation in Sri Lanka, and the perspective and program of the SEP.

"There are a number of political parties and nationalist groups in the North that claim to fight for self-determination for the Tamils. But they have all become props of the Sri Lankan state."

He likened the evolution of the LTTE to that of numerous national liberation movements around the world--the Sandinistas, the African National Congress, the PLO--which have all become tools of

imperialism.

"In all the backward countries, the national bourgeoisie has proven incapable of securing democratic rights or improving the social conditions of the masses. In this region, India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan have all celebrated the 50th anniversaries of their so-called independence. But in spite of this, five decades of local capitalist rule have seen the worsening of poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition. In India, dozens of people are being killed daily in racial and religious clashes organised by right wing organisations like Siva Sena and the BJP.

"In the Killinochchi area where I work thousands of people can only afford a single meal a day. The Peoples Alliance government has cut dry ration food subsidies. Because of poverty and hunger, school children regularly faint in their classrooms. Thousands of poor peasants and children are staging protests against what is a man-made situation. They picket opposite the government offices. This war-torn area has now become a cholera area.

"The state Sinhala media are engaged in vigorous efforts to cover up the impact of the war and prevent it becoming known to the masses in the South. But the SEP's Sinhala newspaper, *Kamkaru Mawatha*, publishes the reports we send from the North, exposing the real conditions that exist. The SEP explains that this war is not a war of the Sinhala masses, but of the Sinhala ruling class, which is trying to sustain its rule by resorting to military methods.

"The SEP calls for the withdrawal of all troops from the North and East, and many people are beginning to support this position. Recent opinion polls show that 77 percent of the population in the South are against the war. Even the poor people in the border villages, who are being attacked by the LTTE, are opposed to it. They have begun to discard the war-mongering of the Sinhala racists."

Sutharsan was arrested by the LTTE at his home in Killinochchi on August 2, 1998, after two other members of the SEP had been arrested on July 2, while they were pasting up posters outlining the SEP's opposition to the war.

"The posters and notices we pasted up in public areas," Sutharsan told us "attracted favourable attention on the part of the people there. During the day we would watch how people gathered around to read our posters and discuss what was in them."

The campaign waged by the ICFI through the *World Socialist Web Site* for the release of the arrested SEP members had a major impact.

"It was like a spotlight focused on the work carried out by the SEP," he said. "It created the conditions for the people in the North, who are kept under a state of siege by both the Colombo regime and the LTTE, to better understand the international nature of the ICFI's political work. People became motivated to find out more about us and our perspective and program. We could see the effect the international campaign was having even while we were under detention. Once it began, the conditions we faced changed, as compared with the way we were treated at the time of our arrest.

"Many organisations in the South issued statements calling for our release. Intellectuals and artists participated in the campaign. And organisations from around the world, from the Australian Education Union to the Indian Jute workers in Calcutta, called for our release. The campaign was discussed by workers, particularly Tamils, in many countries. It was truly a world campaign. Only an internationalist party could have organised it.

"In the end we achieved our aim. This does not mean that we will not face renewed threats. But if we do, we will confront them in the understanding that there are now many readers of the WSW

throughout the world who know about the Tamil struggle, the racist war and the perspectives of the SEP."

Sutharsan explained that since the campaign, there has been a significant growth in interest in the party, on the part of workers and young people in the North. "With the publicity we obtained due to our arrest and the campaign for our release many people came to know that we, unlike all the others, fight to secure the rights of the Tamil people on the basis of an international socialist program. I think this is an enormous gain."

He pointed to the fact that voices of protest were again being raised, this time against the denial of his right to visit Australia. "Undoubtedly," he said, "the influence of the ICFI among thoughtful sections of workers, youth and intellectuals is growing."

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all those concerned with the defence of democratic rights to join with the many individuals and organisations in the US, Europe, Japan, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and Australia who have already written letters condemning the Australian government's denial of Sutharsan's visa and demanding that he be immediately 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

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Australian High Commission

PO Box 742

Colombo, Sri Lanka

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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