MPs and academics join condemnation of Tamil socialist's exclusion from Australia

"This cannot be ignored as a minor incident"

Linda Tenenbaum
9 February 1999

Several academics and politicians in Sri Lanka and Australia have joined with trade unions, civil rights lawyers, students, workers and others concerned with the defence of democratic rights in demanding that the Australian government reverse its decision to bar Tamil socialist, Rajendiram Sutharsan from visiting Australia.

Sutharsan, a member of the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party, was invited by the Socialist Equality Party in Australia to attend an educational school last January, and to address meetings in Melbourne and Sydney on his recent detention and subsequent release by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Sutharsan was arrested, along with three other SEP members, for conducting political work in the north, calling for an end to the racialist war, and for the unity of Tamil and Sinhala workers on the basis of a socialist program.

The Australian High Commission in Colombo rejected his application for a visitor's visa, on the grounds that he presented an "unacceptable risk to the Australian community"--in other words, that he was unlikely to return to Sri Lanka. This was despite being in receipt of 25 pages of documentation detailing Sutharsan's arrest, and the international campaign waged through the *World Socialist Web Site* for his release. The High Commission was also given details of Sutharsan's personal and political commitments in Sri Lanka and guarantees from both the SEP in Sri Lanka and the SEP in Australia that he would return.

Last week, I.G. Weerasekera, Branch President of the Government Clerical Service Union (Ministry of Agriculture and Lands Branch) and a member of the Central Committee of the GCSU, wrote in a letter of protest to the Australian High Commissioner in Colombo that the decision to deny a temporary visitor's visa "to an Asian member of the Socialist Equality Party cannot be ignored as a minor incident. Your decision encourages the growth of Asian and Australian nationalism."

The letter condemned the decision and then continued: "The presumption that Mr Rajendiram will not return to Sri Lanka is the only reason adduced by the Australian High Commission for not issuing the temporary visa for him to enter Australia. It is astonishing to note that a reputed Australian party guaranteeing the return of Mr Sutharsan to Sri Lanka is considered inadequate. I earnestly request that you consider this matter again...."

Three academics from the Department of History and Political Science at the University of Colombo, addressed separate letters to the High Commission. Professor George A Cooray, declared: "The SEP in Australia and Sri Lanka are legitimate political parties and Mr Sutharsan is a member and an organiser of the SEP in Sri Lanka. He has a legitimate right to participate in an educational program organised by the Australian counterpart of the political party to which he belongs in Sri Lanka...I see no logical reason for him to violate the visa conditions laid down by the Australian government since his return has been guaranteed by both sending and receiving parties."

The letter went on: "I personally know Mr Sutharsan as a victim of the LTTE in Sri Lanka and am disturbed by the denial of a visa to a bona fide visitor like him. This amounts to the denial of a basic human right, accepted by the international community..."

Professor Amal Jayawardane wrote: "Mr Sutharsan is an SEP organiser in Killinochchi, and he has already been victimised in Sri Lanka by the LTTE for propagating the fundamental democratic rights of the Tamil people in the island. The SEP is a legitimate political party in Sri Lanka which has consistently fought for democratic and human rights within the country as well as abroad, and I strongly feel that the members of such a party should not be in any way debarred from engaging in political discussions in Australia or in any other country."

K.S.K. Ariyadasa, a lecturer in the same department, requested that the High Commission "issue [Mr Sutharsan]

© World Socialist Web Site

with a visa to enter Australia soon and, in that way, allow him to enjoy his democratic rights."

Linus Jayatilake, the Organising Secretary of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) in Sri Lanka wrote: "We are really shocked at the way this case has been treated." He emphasised the importance of education to the workers' movement, and raised that Sutharsan had been offered a "rare opportunity" to travel. "Therefore, the NSSP strongly recommends that this young colleague, Sutharsan, be given every opportunity for his educational training by the SEP Australia and, as they have given all assurances of his safe return, to facilitate his travel documents."

The Secretary of the Peoples Student Front at the University of Colombo, Nishanthi Priyangika strongly denounced the decision. "The workers have a basic democratic right to participate in international political discussions representing their respective organisations. You could have taken into consideration the long-time SEP membership of Sutharsan as confirmed by both the SEP in Sri Lanka and Australia. He should be allowed to enter Australia and enjoy his political and democratic rights."

Two Australian state parliamentarians, one in Victoria and one in NSW, have sent letters of protest to Phillip Ruddock, Minister for Immigration and Foreign Affairs. "Mr Sutharsan poses no threat to Australia and would most definitely return to Sri Lanka," wrote Dr. Meredith Burgmann, a Labor Party Member of the Legislative Council in the NSW parliament.

"I believe that to refuse him entry is unjustified and unfair, and that Mr Sutharsan should be allowed to enter the country and take up the invitation of the Socialist Equality Party.

"I had hoped that the government would have learnt from the embarrassment caused by its refusals to grant visas to other prominent international figures in recent times, such as Gerry Adams.

"Unfortunately it seems that it has not, and we must once again call upon you to reverse this decision."

Jean McLean, a Labor MLC in the Victorian parliament wrote: "I believe no arguments were provided by the Australian government in response to documented evidence that [Mr Sutharsan] would not remain in Australia at the end of his projected stay. I fail to understand how you have come to the conclusion that he posed an "unacceptable high risk to the Australian community."

She challenged the conception that Sutharsan's visit could constitute a "threat", and commented: "The refusal of a visa to Mr Sutharsan can be seen as a denial of freedom of speech. If the Australian community cannot co-exist with discussion of a campaign which won widespread international support and ensured the freedom of the four captives, then a serious erosion of democratic rights and freedom of speech is occurring in this country. The political motivation of the decision to deny Mr Sutharsan a visa is extremely suspect..."

Growing numbers of workers in Australia, many of them Sri Lankan immigrants, have signed petitions, condemning the Australian government for its "highly discriminatory and politically motivated decision" and demanding that it be immediately reversed. Several have expressed a keen interest in meeting with Sutharsan and hearing him speak on his experiences during his 50-day detention by the LTTE, and on the more general issues confronting the Sri Lankan working class.

Letters, faxes and emails have been sent from Europe, the US, Japan, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and Australia protesting the Australian authorities' exclusion of Sutharsan. The *WSWS* urges all individuals and organisations concerned with the defence of democratic rights to write 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

© World Socialist Web Site