

Victimised SEP member in Sri Lanka reinstated

A correspondent
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B.A. Sarath Kumara, a longstanding member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, who was suspended by Elastomeric Engineers Company Ltd (EECL) last month, has been reinstated following a campaign against his victimisation.

Sarath was suspended on June 13 on bogus charges of refusing to work overtime on the previous day and leaving the factory without informing his superiors. In fact he had obtained the necessary approval to leave the factory at the end of his normal shift in order to see a doctor and had punched his time card. Although he denied the charges, management held an inquiry on July 1 at which he was not permitted to retain a lawyer but only allowed to have a co-worker as an observer.

The fact that management felt confident to move against Sarath is bound up with the climate of repression ushered in by the Peoples Alliance (PA) government. Following a series of military defeats in the north, the PA imposed sweeping emergency regulations, outlawing protests, strikes and industrial action. Employers have exploited the situation to end strikes and press ahead with plans to cut jobs and working conditions.

But at Elastomeric, management was forced to make an abrupt about face. On July 6, Sarath received a letter saying management had decided to reinstate him despite the inquiry having found him “guilty”. It continued: “Your misconduct is very serious. It has made losses for the company financially. However since it appears that you can be converted into a good employee, you are reinstated with immediate effect.”

Sarath reported to work but protested the company's claim that he has been proven guilty and demanded that he be paid for the period of his suspension. He was victimised not because of any misconduct but because he was in the forefront of struggles in the factory for

better working conditions, the right to form a trade union and against retrenchments. In 1997, he campaigned against the closure of Elastomeric Tools and Dies, a sister company of EECL.

It is certainly not normal company practice to reinstate a worker found “guilty” of “serious misconduct” that causes financial loss. Management was clearly concerned at the hostility of other workers to Sarath's suspension. When branch union leaders refused to protest against his victimisation, the SEP launched a petition campaign demanding Sarath's reinstatement. About 40 workers at the EECL factory and another 20 at an adjacent factory, International Construction Consortium, signed.

The article entitled “Sri Lankan SEP member victimised by Elastomeric management” published on the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) on June 26 had a big impact on workers when it was handed out at the factory gate. Workers who had not received the leaflet came and asked for it. Others asked for a translation so that they could better understand its content. In the course of the inquiry, the investigating lawyer asked for the name of the organisation that had distributed the document.

On July 2, a group of Elastomeric workers confronted the leadership of the Inter Company Employees Union (ICEU) at its branch meeting. The ICEU, which is the trade union arm of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has been trying to capitalise on disaffection among workers towards the established trade unions. But its response to Sarath's victimisation reveals that the ICEU offers no alternative for workers to defend their interests.

When workers demanded to know why the union had not protested Sarath's suspension, the branch leaders reacted by blaming Sarath. He had criticised the union

leaders and the JVP, they said, and that is why he had not been defended. Their response only further angered the members of the delegation, who pointed out that Sarath had been with the workers during their struggles. At this point the ICEU general secretary, S. Amerasinghe, a member of the JVP central leadership, intervened to try to defuse the situation, saying that anyone could criticise the JVP and its union. Neither Amerasinghe nor any other union leader, however, lifted a finger to publicly oppose the victimisation.

In fact, the close relationship between the ICEU leaders and Elastomeric management was highlighted during a recent wage dispute at the factory. After abandoning the wage campaign last April, Amerasinghe wrote an apologetic letter to the management, saying: “As we have tried continuously to solve these problems peacefully during the last period, I regret the incidents that have happened in the last few days. In future as in the past, we hope to discuss the employees' problems [with you] in an extremely peaceful manner and [our] union headquarters will be actively involved in this regard.”

The ICEU leadership like that of the JVP, supports the government's war against the Tamil minority and has fallen into line with Kumaratunga's imposition of emergency regulations. In late May, the ICEU ended a three-month strike at the Amico factory in Ratmalana on the management's terms, including the sacking of 25 workers, after the Labour Minister and Labor Commissioner threatened to arrest workers. Amerasinghe signed an agreement with Amico management.

Following his reinstatement at Elastomeric, management has continued to try to intimidate Sarath and other workers. Sarath has been forced to work late night and weekend shifts. Maintenance employees, including Sarath, were called into a meeting and told they would be transferred to another factory if they did not work the rosters required by management.

For several years management has been attempting to restructure the factory's operations and push up productivity and profits. At the beginning of the last year 76 workers, who were just about to finish their probation period, were laid off. More than 100 workers were laid off over the past few months in the same manner. The company has also sacked a number of workers, including a union activist. Working and safety

conditions have deteriorated as workloads have been driven up. A couple of years ago Elastomeric Technologies had about 30 machinists, but now there are only eight to do the same job.

The company produces various types of rubber components, including caster wheels, mainly for the European automotive manufacturers, such as Ford, BMW and Audi. The company was established in 1981 and went public in 1995. A Swiss company, Gislaved Gummi AB, a leading rubber component manufacturer, bought 54 percent of the shares, as part of a major restructuring program launched in 1995.



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