

Attempts to intimidate a WSWS correspondent in Sri Lanka

Our reporter
23 September 2000

Disturbing signs have emerged over the last month of an attempt to intimidate a Socialist Equality Party journalist and SEP members in Uddapu—a remote Tamil fishing village on the northwest coast of Sri Lanka—following the publication of a series of articles on the *World Socialist Web Site* in March.

The series written by R.M. Dayaratne dealt with the harsh conditions, lack of services and the exploitation of the fishermen in the area. It also reported the arrest and detention without trial of a number of people accused of being supporters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

On August 19 Dayaratne was assaulted by a local thug who drew up on a motorbike with an accomplice. When Dayaratne attempted to walk away, the man shouted, “You are the person who is publicising news reports about this village” and then struck him several times.

A crowd quickly gathered and stopped the assault. Some called out: “Why do you want to assault this man? He has exposed our difficulties and our problems.” Others assisted Dayaratne into a three-wheeler taxi in order to get medical treatment.

Dayaratne was treated at Mundalam hospital for his injuries. He made a complaint at the Mundalam police station demanding that the assailant be arrested. The police appear to have taken no action against the man, who has made threats against other SEP members in the village.

Just a week before the assault, a team of three policemen dragged an SEP member out of his home after midnight and physically threatened him if he did not admit to being responsible for setting fire to a fishing net. At the police station, the officers made him sit on the floor while they berated and threatened him: “Aren’t you the man who brings people from the

Socialist Equality Party here? Aren’t you giving information to the press about police activities? You won’t last long in this village.”

The police failed to extract a forced confession. The net owner then began to threaten other SEP members and their families. But neither the owner nor the police have received much support from local villagers. Several villagers have expressed the view that the incident was set up by the net owner who is believed to have close relations to the police.

Uddapu is situated on an isolated strip of land jutting out from Sri Lanka’s northwest coast, separated from the mainland by a series of brackish water lagoons. Road access is difficult. More than 4,000 fishermen and their families live in thatch huts with little access to basic services. Clean drinking water is only accessible kilometres away. The fishing industry is dominated by a handful of boat and net owners and traders who subject fishermen to a system of contract labour that borders on feudal bondage.

Local villagers also face harassment from police and security forces. The WSWS articles highlighted a number of cases in which people had been detained for lengthy periods without trial as “LTTE suspects,” only to have the allegations finally dropped. The International Committee of the Fourth International conducted an international campaign for the release of SEP member Sellaiah Rajkumar who was detained in July 1996 as an “LTTE suspect,” tortured and held in a detention camp for over a year before being finally released without ever being charged.

By exposing the conditions facing fishermen, which are rarely referred to in the Sri Lankan press, let alone the international media, the WSWS articles clearly provoked concerns within local ruling cliques.

The first response came in June when officers from

the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) approached a number of those interviewed in the articles. Though they tried to appear sympathetic to the cases of detention, the CID was evidently fishing for information to discredit the articles.

Now it seems that the police, along with local kingpins, are attempting to intimidate the SEP and prevent any further exposure of their activities.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact