

Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party member faces workplace victimisation

Our correspondent
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Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member B.A. Sarath Kumara was suspended on October 4 by the Elastomeric Engineering Company (EECL) for the second time in five months. Management accused Sarath of engaging in political activities in the workplace during working hours and handed him a “show cause” notice that could result in his sacking.

His suspension came just after the company was forced to reinstate another SEP member, Krishantha Jayasinghe, who had been suspended on false charges of damaging an instrument.

Sarath has been charged with distributing SEP election material during the recent general election, handing out “a publication that would breach peace in the factory” and trying to win over supporters of other parties. When he refused to sign a statement admitting that he had distributed political material during working hours, management slapped on another charge—refusing to obey a management order.

Sarath has denied engaging in political activities within the factory and, at the same time, reiterated his democratic right to distribute party literature. He said that he had legitimately engaged in handing out SEP election leaflets to workers outside the factory. As the events make clear, his suspension is a case of political victimisation aimed at intimidating the SEP and the workforce as a whole.

On October 4, after the lunch break, management demanded to search Sarath's personal locker and found a copy of the SEP election manifesto and several copies of the party's newspaper, *Kamkaru Mawatha*. He was then taken to the office of the Finance Manager, who took the literature and demanded that he write a statement admitting to distributing political material on the premises. Sarath denied the charge.

Some time later, Sarath was again called into the

office and handed a letter suspending him. Without his permission, management had broken into his locker and seized all of his belongings, including two small allen keys. In addition to the political charges, management also claimed that the allen keys belonged to the company and accused him of theft. Sarath protested against the break-in and said the keys were his. The lockers are situated outside the factory gates and workers leaving the factory have to pass through tight security.

Sarath was also suspended in June on a trumped-up charge. The company accused him of refusing to work overtime and leaving the workplace without informing his superior. He denied the charges, pointing out that he had spoken to his supervisor and punched the time clock. Management could not sustain the charges and reinstated Sarath after workers signed a petition protesting his suspension.

The company has targeted Sarath and other SEP members because they have opposed its restructuring plans and fought to defend jobs. In 1997 when management attempted to close the factory, the SEP organised the Elastomeric United Action Committee, which gained significant support from workers, unemployed and young people in the area and forced the company to back down.

The Inter Company Workers Union (ICWU), which is the only union in the factory and is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has taken no action against the suspension of SEP members. ICWU leaders promised to protest against Sarath's earlier suspension but issued no statement.

EECL produces rubber components for the European auto market. It is a joint venture with the Swiss firm Gislaved Gummi AB, which controls 54 percent of shares.

Companies like EECL were placed in a much stronger position when the Peoples Alliance government imposed stringent new emergency powers after a series of military defeats. The regulations outlawed strikes and industrial action, as well as public meetings and demonstrations. A number of other firms took advantage of the situation to attack the wages and conditions of workers.

The repeated attempts to sack Sarath and other SEP members clearly have wider implications. Several big business groups wrote to President Chandrika Kumaratunga recently, outlining an action plan to make local industry more internationally competitive and to encourage investment. One of their key demands was for the right to hire and fire without any restriction under the country's labour laws.



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