Detained for over two years

Sri Lankan SEP renews its call for the release of the Hatton six

The Socialist Equality Party
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Six young Tamil men from Sri Lanka's plantation districts, who have been imprisoned for two and a half years are due to appear in court again on January 26 after a lapse of five months. They are accused of being members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and having taken part in a series of bomb attacks. If found guilty, they face prison terms of up to 20 years.

The six are: Suppu Udayakumar, Pichchamuththu Chandran, Arunasalam Yogeswaran, Solamalai Loganathan, Ponnaiah Saravanakumar and Samimuttu Benedict. All are from plantations near Hatton in the central hills area. Suppu Udayakumar is a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka and contested the 1997 local government election on the SEP slate for the Ambagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabha (regional council) in the Hatton area.

Police originally arrested the six in early June 1998 shortly after a bomb attack on the night of May 31 at the Shannon tea factory near Hatton. Having detained them, the authorities decided to add a string of further allegations—six separate bombings of five electricity transformers and an oil storage tank—stretching back over six months. After holding them for more than a year under Sri Lanka's notorious security laws, the original charge of bombing the tea factory was dropped without explanation.

The case against the youth is a blatant frame-up. The only evidence consists of "confessions" extracted by police. After their arrest they were first taken to Kandy police station and subjected to severe torture, then handed over to the Special Investigation Division (SID) in Colombo for further interrogation. The SID is a police unit that specialises in so-called subversion cases.

The forms of torture used by police in Kandy and Colombo include being forced to lie face down while being beaten on the back, legs and feet; having a polythene bag filled with petrol pulled over the head; beatings while being forced to huddle under a chair; pressing sexual organs inside a drawer; the deprivation of food and water for days at a time. The six have since named 12 members of the SID and police, from the rank of Assistant Superintendent of Police down, involved in their torture.

Some of them still suffer from ailments as a result—difficulty in hearing and breathing, headaches and numb fingers. Suppu Udayakumar was seriously ill and had to be hospitalised for five days in July 1998 while he was in SID custody. A Judicial Medical Officer who examined him recommended that he attend a clinic regularly and undergo medical treatment but he was not allowed to do so by the SID officers.

In the course of the interrogations, the six signed "confessions" written in Sinhala, a language that none of them can read or write. They only became aware of the real content of their statements with the help of their lawyers, after the documents were produced as evidence in court. All six have since repudiated their forced confessions and denied the charges against them.

The youth were held for 13 months under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) without being brought to court. The PTA bypasses the Sri Lankan legal system and gives special powers to the security forces to arbitrarily detain so-called LTTE suspects—renewable every three months. The Act also allows for the confession of an accused to be used against himself—a provision that provides a virtual carte blanche for police torture.

The Hatton six were finally brought to court on July 8, 1999 as a result of a public campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Party. All pleaded not guilty. The case has since been postponed on three separate occasions, each time on the basis of some flimsy pretext: the absence of the chief prosecuting police officer, the non-availability of a trial judge, lack of time for the hearing, etc.

In 1994, shortly after the Peoples Alliance (PA) government came to power, these six detainees were among 23 plantation youth taken into custody as "LTTE suspects" accused of blowing up transformers and burgling an estate manager's residence. Udayakumar and Loganathan were detained for two years without trial and finally released unconditionally as a result of an SEP campaign to free them.

The others were coerced by the police and a state-appointed lawyer into pleading guilty to the false charges in return for their release and a fine. Such deals are common and frequently involve the transfer of tens of thousands of rupees into the pockets of police officers. But once having pled guilty to "subversion," the victims become easy prey for re-arrest—either because the police calculate further monetary gain can be made or because they want to tally up promotional points by detaining "terrorists".

Detention of Tamils without trial is part of the climate of racialist intimidation maintained by the security forces in the context of the long-running civil war against the LTTE. President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her Peoples Alliance government promised to negotiate with the LTTE and end the conflict but instead escalated the military offensive in a "war for peace". The war itself was the outcome of systematic discrimination, harassment and violence against the country's Tamil minority under successive governments in Colombo since the country's independence in 1948.

Anti-Tamil chauvinism, the stock-in-trade of the major political parties, has led to the growth of extreme rightwing and fascistic

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parties such as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Sihala Urumaya which demand a stepping up of the war and are vehemently opposed to any peace negotiations. In the name of "defending the Sinhalese people," these organisations work hand-in-hand with sections of the security forces, often acting as provocateurs.

Throughout the country the police and army maintain a security blanket of checkpoints, identity cards and searches backed by a battery of anti-democratic laws such as the PTA. Hundreds of Tamils from the war zones in the north and east, and also from the plantation areas, have been detained for months and years without trial. There have been a number of protests by detainees demanding to be "released or charged," which are usually met with repression.

On October 25, a Sinhala racist mob, with the support of the security forces, invaded a detention centre at Bindunuwewa and brutally hacked and burned to death 29 Tamil detainees who complained about the conditions and their lengthy detention without trial. Police on the scene failed to stop the thugs entering the centre and shot detainees who were trying to flee their attackers. Perversely the government and the media blamed the "hidden hand" of the LTTE, claiming it had deliberately provoked the attack.

The Bindunuwewa massacre provoked widespread protests by plantation workers as well as among Tamils in the north and east of the country prompting a crackdown by police in which six people were killed and dozens arrested. In the aftermath of the strikes and demonstrations, the government is establishing a string of army camps in the central hills, instituting special identity cards and other security arrangements that are akin to the measures already in place in the country's war zones.

Tamil plantation workers, who were brought to Sri Lanka by the British colonialists and form one of the most oppressed layers of the working class, have been a particular target of the Sinhalese racists. Shortly after independence, the United National Party government passed the Citizenship Act disenfranchising hundreds of thousands of plantation Tamils. In 1964, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party—the main party in the present PA coalition—signed the Sirima-Shasthri pact with the Indian government to deport 525,000 estate workers to India.

Over the last six years, the PA government has finalised the privatisation of the tea and rubber estates leading to a deterioration of wages and conditions and rising unemployment particularly among young people. Falling commodity prices have spurred plantation companies to demand lower wages and greater productivity, which in turn has provoked a number of major strikes.

To justify further repression in the plantation areas, the government and the media have been waging a propaganda campaign alleging "LTTE infiltration". The case of the Hatton six has been singled out as "proof" that the LTTE is carrying out terrorist activities in the central hills districts. An article early last year in the Sinhala daily, *Lankadeepa*, wrote at length on the case utilising details that could only have been supplied by the police.

None of the traditional parties and trade unions have defended the Tamil plantation workers against the attack on their living standards or democratic rights. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and, a year ago, the Up Country Peoples Front (UPF) were part of the ruling alliance that carried out the privatisation of the estates and the slashing of wages and conditions. The response of the CWC and UPF leaders to the Bindunuwewa massacre and the subsequent protests was to offer to cooperate more closely with the government and the police. None of these organisations have come to the aid of the Hatton six.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the continued detention without trial of the six young men is an outrage against basic democratic rights. Their forced confessions, the unexplained change in the charges and the lack of any other evidence mean that there is no case to answer. They are innocent and must be immediately freed.

Whoever carried out the bombings in 1998, the responsibility rests first and foremost with the PA government and its predecessors that have created appalling conditions for the Tamil minority. Secondly, responsibility lies with the LTTE leadership, which promotes the reactionary policy of terrorist acts, in some cases aimed at ordinary Sinhalese workers and villagers, as a legitimate means of struggle.

The only outcome of terrorist raids and suicide bombings, in which the lives of hundreds of courageous young Tamils have been wantonly squandered, is to inflame divisions between the Sinhalese and Tamil masses and to enable the Sri Lankan government and state to step up its repression of the Tamil minority. Every terrorist act is seized upon as the means for justifying the collective punishment of all Tamils and the arrest, detention and torture of entirely innocent Tamil workers and youth.

The Socialist Equality Party reiterates its demand for the immediate and unconditional release of the six plantation youth. We call upon all workers, intellectuals and young people—in Sri Lanka and internationally—to stand up in defence of the Hatton six by sending letters of protest to the Sri Lankan government. We appeal in particular to the Sinhalese working class and oppressed masses to reject the racist propaganda of the government and the media and to come to the aid of their Tamil brothers by insisting that the six be freed.

The defence of the democratic rights of the Tamil people is essential in laying the basis for the unification of Sinhalese and Tamil workers in the broader struggle to end the racialist war that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Tamils and Sinhalese alike.

Letters should be sent to:

The Attorney General
Attorney General's Department
Colombo 12
Sri Lanka
Fax: 0094-1-436421

Please refer to case numbers:

NJ 1290/99, NJ 1291/ 99, 1292/ 99 and NJ 1295/99/

Please send copies to:

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