Politically motivated attacks on the SEP in Sri Lanka

A correspondent
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A series of incidents in the central plantation districts of Sri Lanka all point to a politically motivated campaign aimed at intimidating members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). The attacks come in the wake of the SEP's success in forcing the government to free four out of six Tamil plantation workers held without trial for over two years under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

The first incident took place on October 8. Three young thugs armed with clubs slipped into the home of Shanthakumar, a prominent SEP member in Hatton, during the country's regular power blackout—around 7.30pm. They approached Shanthakumar while he was at his desk and started to hit him. Amid a torrent of filthy language, they shouted in Tamil: "You are criticising everyone." They ran off when Shanthakumar began to defend himself.

The following day another SEP member in the Hatton area received an anonymous threat by phone. The caller said in Tamil: "I know you and your friends. You are working in collaboration with Shanthakumar. Be careful." Referring to the SEP's campaign, he exclaimed: "What is the concern of you and your chaps about political prisoners? This is the last warning to you." The caller refused to identify himself but said he was from Hatton and belonged to an organisation demanding "the up-country for Tamils".

A number of organisations function as trade unions and political parties among Tamil-speaking workers in the up-country or central hill districts of Sri Lanka. The SEP's campaign to free Tamil detainees has politically exposed the failure of any of them to defend the hundreds of mainly young Tamils held for months and years without trial on trumped up charges of being members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The particular organisation that advocates autonomy for the plantation areas is known as the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF).

While there is no proof of UPF involvement on these occasions, it did directly participate in another incident two weeks later. Two prominent UPF members were involved with the police and the management of the Enfield Estate in instigating the arrest of an SEP member, Savarimuththu, over a bogus complaint.

On October 19, the estate management provocatively directed some of its workers to tear down an old hut on a small piece of land bought by Savarimuththu eight years ago on the periphery of the estate. He was forced to make a living growing and selling fruit after the estate refused to employ him. The estate superintendent alleged the hut was encroaching on estate land—a claim that Savarimuththu refutes on basis of legal documents.

Savarimuththu stopped the demolition of his hut. The following day he was confronted by a team of police along with two UPF members. Segar, who is well-known as a UPF candidate in local and national elections, did the talking and attempted to convince Savarimuththu to hand his land back to the estate in return for the promise of employment.

Savarimuththu refused and remarked that the UPF and its leader P. Chandrasekaran had failed to defend Tamil detainees, including himself. He was detained in early 1995 as an "LTTE suspect" and only released in 1997 after an SEP campaign. Previously a UPF member he had left in disgust and later joined the SEP. In response to this reminder, Segar snapped back that Savarimuththu was talking too much and he was arrested.

Savarimuththu was released the following day on personal bail after interventions made by the SEP leadership in the area and in Colombo. Police, however, say they intend to proceed with the case. When

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Savarimuththu appeared at the police station last week, the local police chief threatened to "smash" him if he did not sign a document handing over his land.

The whole incident has the hallmarks of a political provocation. Even if the estate management felt it had a genuine grievance, minor encroachments on estate land are common and generally ignored. In this case, however, management was determined to turn the issue into a major dispute. No explanation was given as to why UPF members were involved nor why they arrived together with police in a private van rather than a police vehicle. The SEP's lawyers insist that the police had no grounds to detain Savarimuththu on such flimsy charges.

Taken together the incidents indicate that the UPF and possibly other trade union organisations are deeply concerned over the impact among Tamil plantation workers of the SEP's campaign against the unjust detention of Tamils. In July, the Attorney General's department was compelled to withdraw the indictments against four of six young plantation workers held without trial since June 1998. The government repeatedly stalled court proceedings and finally dropped the case, tacitly admitting that the "confessions" of the four—the only evidence against them—were obtained through torture.

The SEP's campaign received significant coverage in Sri Lanka, including in the Tamil newspaper *Veerakesari* and on the Tamil radio service *Suriyan FM*, which quoted from *World Socialist Web Site*. The *WSWS* articles, which point out the failure of the UPF and other trade unions to defend the detainees, have been circulated in the plantation areas and have become a focus for discussion.

So when the UPF tried to claim credit in the media for the release of the four detainees, there was a sharp response from detainees. On September 26, *Suriyan FM* news bulletin read out an appeal from the political prisoners in Kalutara prison asking the public to support the SEP saying that it is the only party fighting to release of political prisoners.

The SEP has received requests for assistance from other Tamil political prisoners. Eleven political prisoners at Kalutara prison wrote to the SEP seeking its intervention on their behalf. Muththusamy, a worker from the Moccar Estate, wrote to SEP on behalf of his detained son Singarayar as follows: "I heard about your party and its activities. It is the only organisation, which fights for the release of youths. Please help us to get our son released."

The attempts to intimidate the SEP should be condemned and the UPF leadership, if it is responsible, should call its thugs into line. The SEP is continuing its campaign for the release of political prisoners.

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