

Socialist Equality Party campaign frees two Tamil detainees in Sri Lanka

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Two Tamil detainees, Ponniah Saravanakumar and Arunachalam Yogeswaran, were finally freed on March 7, after being held for three years and eight months without trial under Sri Lanka's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Their release follows a lengthy campaign by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) on behalf of six young Tamils from Hatton in the country's central hill estate area, who were arrested on bogus charges in 1998. The four others were freed last July.

The Kandy High Court ordered the release Saravanakumar and Yogeswaran on February 21 after the state counsel withdrew the charges against them. The SEP lawyer had shown that the only evidence against the two consisted of confessions extracted under duress. Their medical records demonstrated that they had been subject to gross physical torture. It took a further two weeks to obtain their freedom due to the prevailing prison regulations and the racially discriminative practices of prison officers.

Police arrested the six Tamils in June 1998, alleging they had bombed the Shannon tea factory near Hatton and had contact with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Under the PTA, the security forces can hold suspected "terrorists" for three months without producing them in court. During this time, the Hatton Six were tortured in order to extract false confessions.

After detaining the six for a year, without charge or trial, the police dropped the initial allegations and presented new trumped-up charges to the Kandy High Court in July 1999. They were accused of bombing several electrical transformers and petrol tanks in the Hatton-Talawakele area and of having LTTE connections. The only evidence against the six were signed "confessions" typed in Sinhala, a language they neither read nor write.

After eight postponements, either by the prosecution or presiding judge, the case was finally set for trial at the end of 2000. Again in January 2001, the hearing was delayed for another year to February 2002. But responding to the growing protests elicited by the SEP's campaign, the Attorney General's Department was compelled to advance the trial date to July last year.

Four of the detainees—Suppu Udayakumar, Pichchamuththu

Chandran, Solamalai Yoganathan and Samimuththu Benedict—were released on July 3 after their Judicial Medical Reports showed they had been tortured. However, the Attorney General arbitrarily refused to drop the charges against Saravanakumar and Yogeswaran, claiming their medical records had not been submitted. The two were kept in prison for a further eight months while the Attorney General's Department carried out what was their responsibility—to study the medical reports.

The release of the Hatton Six is a significant victory for the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site*, which broadly publicised their case. Individuals and organisations in Sri Lanka and from the US, UK, Australia and Romania wrote to the Attorney General's office in Colombo to protest this flagrant breach of basic democratic rights and to demand the unconditional release of the detainees. These included Dharmasiri Bandaranayaka, a well-known Sri Lankan film director, Professor George Cooray from Colombo University, the Central Bank Employees Union and the Ceylon Teachers Union.

In the course of the country's protracted civil war, thousands of Tamils have been detained on equally flimsy grounds as "LTTE suspects" as part of the systematic intimidation and harassment of the country's Tamil minority. According to official records, 13,514 Tamil youths were arrested under the PTA and emergency regulations in the first 11 months of the year 2000 alone. Around 2,500 were kept under detention during that period.

Currently about 1,600 Tamils are still in prisons at Kalutara, Boossa, Colombo, Bogambara, Negombo, Badulla, Jaffna and Batticaloa. Most are being held without being convicted—in some case for seven or eight years. A number of Tamil political detainees have been murdered by Sinhala prisoners acting in cahoots with racist prison officers. Others have been shot by prison warders themselves.

None of the parties or organisations that claim to represent Tamils have waged a campaign against the PTA or the arbitrary detentions. To do so would cut across their wheeling and dealing with the two major bourgeois parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Peoples Alliance (PA)—that have been responsible for prosecuting the war and carrying out

systematic discrimination against Tamils.

The current UNP-led government has just signed a permanent ceasefire agreement with the LTTE as the precursor to negotiations over an end to the war. This Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been hailed by all the Tamil parties of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), as well as by the political organisations of the Tamil estate workers such as Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF). But none of these parties, which back the UNP administration, or the LTTE insisted that the MoU include the revoking of the PTA and the release of hundreds of Tamils languishing in Sri Lankan prisons. The government has only agreed to stop further arrests under emergency legislation.

In response to a hunger strike by detainees, the Minister for Refugees and Resettlement Jayalath Jayawardena visited the Kalutara prison on March 7 and told the protestors that the Attorney General had agreed to release all those held without charge. The protest was called off but a government committee, formed to examine the issue, decided only to transfer Tamil detainees from Kalutara and Boossa to prisons near their home towns. The measure appears to be aimed at breaking up protest rather than at preparing for the release of detainees.

The released detainees and their parents expressed their appreciation to the SEP for the campaign waged on their behalf. Saravanakumar and Yogeswaran told our reporters: “The SEP was the only political party, which fought for our release. We would like to especially thank *World Socialist Web Site*. It campaigned not only in Sri Lanka but also internationally and fully exposed the problems facing the detainees.”

The two detainees explained that they had written to the CWC and the UPF many times requesting their intervention but no active assistance had been offered. Saravanakumar was critical of the UPF leader Chandrasekaran, saying that his “actions are very suspicious”. Chandrasekaran, who is a government minister, recently visited Kalutara prison. While calling for the release of detainees, his main purpose was to urge prisoners not to carry out a planned protest fast, saying “the racialsists can use this and they can wage their campaigns against the government”.

Saravanakumar and Yogeswaran also accused the TNA—a five party alliance including the Tamil United Liberation Front (LTTE), the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), Peoples’ Liberation Organisation of Tamil Elam (PLOTE), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO) and a faction of Eelam People Liberation Front (EPRLF)—of being stooges of the government.

“Some prisoners have been detained without trial for seven or eight years. But these organisations did nothing. TELO leader Selvam Adeikalanathan and Thangavadiel, a TULF member, visited us but they only came to boost their own image.” The two released detainees appealed to the SEP to continue its campaign on behalf of other Tamil political prisoners.

Udayakumar, who was released last year, was bitter about the role of ACTC leader Vinayagamurthy. “He is one of the

country’s leading lawyers and a leader of a Tamil party and has appeared for most Tamil youth. But he always insists that the youth plead guilty in order to get lesser punishments. That way he helps the authorities to justify their arrests.”

Arunachalam, Yogeswaran’s father and a plantation worker, attacked CWC and UPF leaders who have been attempting to belittle the SEP’s campaign in order to cover up their own inaction. “Some say that my son and Saravanakumar have been released as a result of the MoU signed by the government and the LTTE. I don’t agree with this. Why didn’t they release all the other detainees? They released these two because the SEP and its campaign through the WSWs demanded the release of our children. That campaign exposed the fabricated case [against the six] and torture [they were subjected to]”.

“I approached [UPF leader] Chandrasekaran on several occasions regarding the arrest of my son. He did nothing. He has done nothing for the plantation workers up to now. But now he has gone to the Eastern Province and praised the LTTE leader as the one and only leader for the Tamils living in Sri Lanka. He has spoken in that way not to get something for the people but for their own interest. I encourage my son to join the SEP and I will do the maximum to strengthen this party”.

Chandran, who was released last year, said that the SEP’s campaign had educated him about the UNP and governments and the role of the CWC and UPF: “Those days, of course, we thought that there was a difference between the UNP and the PA and also between the CWC and the UPF. But now I don’t think so. The campaign for our release has educated us to a certain degree. I feel that it is my duty to strengthen the SEP.”

While the SEP’s campaign has been successful in releasing the Hatton Six, hundreds of political prisoners remain under detention without trial. The SEP is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners detained under the PTA and other emergency legislation.

Eleven detainees at the Kalutara prison have sent a signed letter appealing to the SEP to intervene on their behalf. The SEP is taking steps to provide them with legal assistance and will publish details of their cases on the WSWs. We appeal to workers, youth and intellectuals in Sri Lanka and internationally to support our ongoing campaign for the release of political prisoners in Sri Lanka and the abolition of anti-democratic emergency legislation.



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