

Despite government interference

## Sri Lankan SEP May Day meeting to go ahead

Wije Dias  
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Despite the United National Front (UNF) government's decision to block the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka from using its allocated venue, the party has rescheduled its May Day meeting for the YMCA Hall, Bristol Street in downtown Colombo at 3 p.m. on May 1. The SEP was forced to make the last minute change after the Interior Minister overrode the existing procedure for allotting May Day venues and routes.

For years, the police have convened a conference of different political parties and organisations to make the allocation. The authorities have insisted on the meeting to avoid clashes in circumstances where a large number of parties and trade unions have traditionally held separate May Day celebrations.

The meeting this year took place on April 7. The SEP was given the New Town Hall, which is in the heart of the city and is managed by the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC).

However, when an SEP representative went to the Colombo Municipal offices on April 21 to confirm the booking and pay the charges, he was told that the hall had been reserved by the ruling UNF. The Town Hall treasurer produced a list of allocations sent by the Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG) for Colombo, which made no reference to the SEP or the New Town Hall.

The following day the SEP contacted the deputy inspector who said a mistake had been made. He issued a letter to the municipal authorities, acknowledging the error and apologising for any inconvenience caused to the municipal authorities in correcting it.

The SEP presented the letter but was told by the Municipal Commissioner that the Interior Minister had

issued an order not to allocate meeting halls around the municipal premises to organisations other than the UNF. The order, which applied to more than a square kilometre in the centre of the city, was made on the pretext that the UNF would be using the municipal premises.

On the SEP's insistence, the Municipal Commissioner telephoned the Interior Minister, John Amaratunga, to explain that the police had allocated the New Town Hall to the SEP. According to the commissioner, Amaratunga simply said that, as Interior Minister, he had the power to overrule the deputy inspector and the results of the police conference—effectively tearing up the May Day procedure followed for decades.

In this light, the omission of the SEP's name from the original list sent to the municipal offices was no mistake. The mayor of Colombo is a UNF member. It is not hard to understand how the police and the municipality connived with the Interior Minister, who is in charge of police affairs, to block the SEP meeting. To add insult to the injury, the state-controlled Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation reported that the SEP had run into problems with its May Day meeting but failed to say anything about the culprits.

The SEP has issued a public statement condemning the government decision and warning that it foreshadows further attacks on the democratic rights of working people.



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