

Why the LTTE has targetted SEP members in northern Sri Lanka

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19 June 2003

Over the past nine months, there has been a series of extraordinary delays in three court cases involving threats and violence by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) on the island of Kayts in northern Sri Lanka. The drawn-out legal proceedings reveal a close collaboration between the LTTE and the state apparatus in covering up the attacks and preventing any action being taken against the individuals responsible.

The Kayts police only filed the cases against the LTTE members and supporters belatedly, after the SEP and *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) launched a campaign to defend the SEP members. But the court proceedings have dragged on for six months, during which time the local police have engaged in a series of manoeuvres to delay them indefinitely.

In the first case, the police have not even served a summons on Semmanan, the LTTE's former political leader on Kayts. He is charged with making death threats against SEP members last September after they refused to hand over funds from the Ampihainagar Fishermen Cooperative Union (AFCU) to build an LTTE area office. In the intervening months, the LTTE has attempted to seize control of the union using completely anti-democratic methods.

At the latest proceedings on June 13, the police declared—for the fifth time—that no summons had been served. Police officers have given various flimsy pretexts—attempting initially to claim that it was the responsibility of the Sri Lankan Monitoring Mission (SLMM), which oversees the ceasefire between Colombo government and LTTE fighters. Now that the court has ordered the summons be served, the police plead “non-availability”. This claim is simply absurd. The LTTE has openly promoted Semmanan to the post of deputy political leader for Jaffna and he can readily be found at his public office in Kokuvil on the Jaffna peninsula.

The second case involves a physical attack on SEP member Nagarajah Kodeeswaran on October 8. After a lengthy delay, the police eventually detained LTTE member Karthikesu Amirthalingam. But from the outset, they attempted to minimise the seriousness of the assault. Kodeeswaran spent four days in hospital with injuries to his head, neck and shoulders. The police initially charged Amirthalingam with causing simple hurt—a relatively minor offense—precipitating a drawn-out legal argument over the charges, which has yet to be resolved. Kodeeswaran's lawyer has explained that the circumstances of the attack and the nature of the blows indicate a *prima facie* case for attempted murder.

In the third case, involving further threats and damage to the fishing equipment of SEP members, the police have attempted to turn the case against the SEP. While there is no evidence of wrongdoing on the part of any SEP member, the police asked the court to impose a binding order on the SEP and the LTTE—a measure aimed at gagging the SEP. The court has asked for written affidavits from both parties, which the SEP promptly provided. The LTTE's lawyer has failed to produce any affidavit and even appear at the last two hearings—effectively delaying the case indefinitely. Neither the police nor the court have taken any action.

The police stalling tactics, which the court has allowed to proceed, are not a matter of inexperience or ineptitude. The Sri Lankan police are well known for their rapid reactions and ruthlessness—when they want to be. In the course of the country's 19-year civil war, the police, along with the rest of the security forces, detained thousands of Tamils as “LTTE suspects” on the flimsiest of evidence under Sri Lanka's draconian security laws. Now, when there is evidence of open LTTE thuggery against socialists, they deliberately drag their feet in taking the most minimal action.

This is not just a question of individual local police officers failing to do their duty. They could only proceed as they have with the sanction of the upper echelons of the state. Their actions are bound up with the new relationship between the LTTE and the United National Front (UNF) government in Colombo. Both are seeking a political settlement to end the protracted civil war. After a ceasefire agreement was signed in February last year, Colombo instructed various state authorities, including the police in the north and east, to avoid anything that might offend the LTTE.

Kayts assistant police superintendent Janaka Gunatilake referred directly to the new government policy when he spoke to an SEP representative last October. “We can inform the LTTE of our inquiry,” he said. “But if they do not turn up we cannot do anything because of a government order. The SLMM is now responsible for LTTE matters.”

In reviewing the course of developments over the last nine months, a basic question arises: why has the LTTE gone to such extraordinary lengths to pursue a vendetta against the SEP and gain control of what is a relatively small fishermen's union on the island of Kayts?

The issue has been bluntly raised in several letters to the WSWS from LTTE supporters who have attempted to ridicule the WSWS campaign to defend the socialists on Kayts. Like all political opportunists, they are mesmerised by numbers and immediate appearances. Why would the LTTE, the undisputed leadership of the Tamil masses, bother with the activities of a party as small and inconsequential as the SEP, they scornfully ask.

The facts speak for themselves. As the court records testify, the LTTE has, in the course of the last nine months, devoted considerable energy to collaborating with its previous enemies—the police and state apparatus—in suppressing the basic democratic rights of the SEP on Kayts. It has used every dirty trick in the book to hijack the Ampihainagar Fishermen Cooperative Union—and its funds—with the complicity of state officials.

Notwithstanding the claims of its supporters, the LTTE leadership regards the SEP and its socialist program as a definite political threat. As the peace talks have proceeded, it has become more and more evident that the LTTE's perspective of a power-sharing arrangement with the Colombo government stands in direct opposition to the interests of working people—Tamil and Sinhala alike. The LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham has already pledged support for “market economic policies” that will further erode the living standards of the masses.

Concerned at the potential erosion of its political support, the LTTE has

not hesitated to use the most ruthless methods to suppress the activities of its opponents. It has been particularly sensitive to the growing stature of the SEP among Tamil fishermen—one of the most oppressed layers of working people and among whom the LTTE previously had significant support.

The SEP—and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—is the only party that consistently demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the Sri Lankan armed forces from the north and east. At the same time, the SEP has opposed the LTTE's demand for a separate capitalist statelet of Tamil Eelam, insisting that the democratic rights of the Tamil masses can only be defended through a united struggle of the Sinhala and Tamil workers for genuine social equality.

On this basis, the SEP has intransigently defended the rights of Tamil fishermen against the bans and limitations imposed by the Sri Lankan navy and was instrumental in forming the Ampihainagar Fishermen Cooperative Union and the Paruthiadaippu union in 1999. When the Sri Lankan navy snatched fish from poor fishermen, these unions launched campaigns to demand compensation. The SEP also exposed the brutal treatment of fishermen and their families by the armed forces—including cases of rape and murder.

The SEP's actions encouraged local fishermen to take a stand in defence of their rights. In March 2000, for instance, fishermen on Kayts boycotted a meeting called to enforce onerous government restrictions on fishing times and locations. Incensed that his orders had been openly disobeyed, the meeting convenor N. Mathanarajah, a local official of the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), issued a menacing "final and last warning" to SEP member and Paruthiadaippu union leader R. Sudarshan to stop his political work.

In January 2003, when Sudarshan met the Jaffna cooperative inspector, he was flatly told that the LTTE had directed that the Paruthiadaippu union not be registered. Sudarshan protested but to no avail. The LTTE's actions parallel exactly those of the EPDP, which was widely despised for its activities as the armed auxiliary of the Sri Lankan military during the civil war. In 1999, the EPDP, concerned over the growing SEP support, demanded that the cooperative inspector refuse to recognise the Paruthiadaippu union.

The LTTE was even more alarmed in late January this year when the leaders of 18 unions representing about 1,000 fishermen in the northern islands met and formed a federation. The elected leadership committee decided to appoint Sudarshan as federation president. When the LTTE found out, they called a meeting of union federation leaders and ousted Sudarshan—not in a debate over political issues, but through bureaucratic manoeuvres. At the LTTE's instigation, the cooperative inspector attended the meeting and declared Sudarshan could not serve as president as his union was not registered.

Two LTTE officials on Kayts also attended the meeting—area leader Arunthavan and naval wing leader Maravan Master—and made thinly veiled threats against both the SEP and other union leaders present. Arunthavan insinuated that SEP members would be given "proper medicine" and questioned "in dark rooms" for failing to toe the LTTE line. Maravan Master warned that, as in the LTTE-controlled Vanni area, local LTTE officials knew how to get back outstanding money on union loans provided to fishermen.

The LTTE's actions against the SEP are a sharp warning of how the organisation will react to growing signs of hostility among the broader Tamil masses. There is no doubt that the vast majority of working people—Tamil and Sinhala alike—want an end to the war. But it is becoming increasingly obvious that the peace deal being cobbled together by the Colombo government and the LTTE is aimed at serving the interests of the major powers, foreign investors and big business, not those of the masses.

Hundreds of thousands of Tamils displaced by the war are still

linguishing in refugee camps or other places. In the war-torn north and east of the island, very little has been done to alleviate widespread poverty. The LTTE has compounded the social problems by imposing its own taxes and thus raising prices on basic necessities. Inmates at a refugee camp recently told the WSWs: "They all come here, talk to us and go. But we are still suffering."

On May Day, the growing alienation from the LTTE was on public display. The LTTE organisers had expected a turn out of tens of thousands to their demonstrations but only around 2,000 took part. In a recent letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, LTTE chief negotiator Balasingham pleaded for concessions, on the basis that "people are losing confidence in us". Last week the LTTE launched a "Tamil awakening movement" as a desperate attempt to shore up its dwindling political base.

What the LTTE fears is that layers of Tamils will look elsewhere for a means of defending their basic rights and increasingly turn to the SEP and its socialist alternative. Unlike other Sri Lankan parties, the SEP has a long and unblemished history of defending the democratic rights of Tamils and opposing the war waged by successive Colombo governments.

It is not surprising that the LTTE is now using the same methods as the EPDP three years ago. The role that it aspires to through the peace process is not so different from that of the EPDP—to work in conjunction with the Colombo government to enforce the dictates of big business. As a result, the LTTE cannot tolerate the SEP, which threatens to become a pole of attraction for workers, youth and intellectuals. Unable to win support for its perspective in open political debate, the LTTE, like the EPDP, resorts to outright thuggery.

The LTTE's attacks on the SEP must be vigorously opposed by all those who value basic democratic rights. We therefore urge all WSWs readers to send letters of protest to the LTTE and to contribute generously to the party's defence fund. The defence of the SEP's rights is integral to defending those of the working class as a whole.

Letters can be sent to:

Jaffna

Ilamparithi
LTTE Jaffna Office
Potpathy Road,
Kokuvil
Jaffna

Colombo

LTTE
c/- Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission
PO Box 1930
Galle Road
Colombo 3
Email: slmm-hq@mfa.no

They can also be posted or faxed to:

London

The LTTE
c/- Eelam House
202 Long Lane
London SE1 4QB
United Kingdom
Telephone: 44-207-403-4554
Fax: 44-207-403-1653

(Please note changes in telephone and fax numbers)

Please send copies of all statements to the WSWs at: editor@wsws.org
Fax:

United States: 248 967 3023

Britain: 0114 244 0224

Australia: 02 9790 3501

Donations to the SEP's 250,000 rupee (\$US2,500) campaign fund can be sent to:

Account Number 1472834301 at the Kirullapona Branch of the
Commercial Bank of Ceylon
94A Pamankada Road
Kirullapona
Colombo
Sri Lanka



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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