

Sri Lanka: JVP-affiliated union issues threat against Socialist Equality Party

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A trade union affiliated to the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) has issued a menacing threat within Sri Lanka's Central Bank against Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters in the leadership of the Central Bank Employees Union (CBEU).

The SEP, and its forerunner the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), have a long history of fighting for political principle and defending the rights of workers at the Central Bank. SEP member K.B. Mavikumbura and SEP supporter M.W. Piyaratna have been union president and treasurer respectively since 2001. Mavikumbura has held various leadership posts dating back to 1985.

The JVP and its affiliated union, the Sri Lanka Central Bank Employees Union (SLCBEU), are hostile to the SEP and its opposition to the country's escalating civil war. The JVP not only supports the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse but insists that it should intensify the military offensive to completely destroy the "terrorist" Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The SLCBEU issued an inflammatory leaflet against the CBEU leaders following the union's annual general meeting on September 14. A majority voted for a political resolution presented by Mavikumbura and Piyaratna that condemned the war, its burdens on the working class and the suppression of democratic rights. The resolution called on workers to unite across the communal divide and to demand the withdrawal of military from the North and East of the island as part of the broader struggle for socialism.

The SLCBEU leaflet dated September 21 accused Mavikumbura of "leading a project for years to back LTTE terrorism". It recalled the LTTE's bombing of the Central Bank in 1996, which killed 86 people and seriously injured more than 1,000. "Accordingly, who can deny the fact that we who were hit by LTTE terrorism once will be subjected to an attack again with the help of *Sinhala Koti* tomorrow?" it declared.

In the lexicon of Sinhala communalism, *Sinhala Koti* meaning Sinhala Tigers or LTTE supporters is equivalent to denouncing someone as a traitor. The SLCBEU's patriotic

diatribe called on CBEU members to oust Mavikumbura and Piyaratna from the union leadership or to leave and join the SLCBEU. But in the charged political climate generated by President Rajapakse's renewed war, the denunciation carries a more sinister threat of political persecution, summary arrest or physical violence.

Hundreds of people in Colombo as well as the North and East have been murdered or "disappeared" over the past year in circumstances that point to the operation of military-sponsored death squads. More have been arbitrarily detained as LTTE "terrorists" under the country's draconian emergency legislation and Prevention of Terrorism laws.

The JVP itself is notorious for violence and murder. In the late 1980s, JVP gangs killed hundreds of political opponents, unionists and workers who opposed their reactionary patriotic campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord—a deal between Colombo and New Delhi to end the war. The RCL and its members in the CBEU were in the forefront of fighting for a united front to defend workers and their organisations.

JVP thugs murdered three RCL members—R.A. Pitawela, P.H. Gunapala and Greshan Geekiyanage—in November and December 1988. RCL members in the CBEU were particular targets because the union had opposed the JVP's demands to join its patriotic protests and strikes. On December 26, 1988, four gunmen were sent to murder Mavikumbura. They arrived at the building site for his house, demanding that workers tell them where he was living.

Less than three months ago, in early August, members of the JVP-affiliated Inter University Student Federation threatened to assault SEP and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) members campaigning at Peradeniya University against the war in Iraq and the civil war in Sri Lanka. The SEP wrote to the JVP Secretary Tilvin Silva to demand an end to threats of violence against the ISSE, but has received no reply.

The SLCBEU leaflet last month underscored its threat by referring to the arrest in February of *Sinhala Koti* in the rail unions. In a blaze of publicity, the military boasted that it

had broken up a major conspiracy. Three men involved in the publication of a union journal were detained and less than 48 hours later paraded before the media as having “confessed” to being members of the previously unknown Revolutionary Liberation Organisation (RLO) and receiving LTTE arms and training. Further arrests followed.

From the outset, the RLO affair smacked of a state-orchestrated provocation. A month later the *Sunday Leader* reported that a central figure involved in organising the LTTE training was a person known as “Sharmal”, who worked for military intelligence. Moreover, far from being an LTTE member, Sharmal had belonged to the JVP, continued to maintain close contact with senior JVP leaders and had been sent to Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse by JVP parliamentary leader Wimal Weerawansa.

None of the 24 detained activists who have now been held for eight months in the Boosa detention camp has been charged. Yet the JVP continues its campaign denouncing them as *Sinhala Koti* and calling on workers to break from “traitor” unions. Needless to say the JVP has remained completely silent on its role in collaborating with the security forces in hatching this plot, which is used as part of the government’s propaganda against any strike or protest.

The SLCBEU’s accusations that Mavikumbura has been backing “LTTE terrorism” for years and is helping to preparing another LTTE bombing of the Central Bank are slanders. The SEP/RCL has a long record of opposing all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, including the LTTE’s communal politics. The RCL publicly condemned the bombing of the Central Bank, explaining that it would only provide political fodder for chauvinist parties like the JVP and served to divide the working class.

The SEP’s call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of security forces from the North and East does not signify support for the LTTE. The North and East have been under de facto martial law for more than two decades with basic democratic rights, particularly of Tamils, systematically suppressed. The demand for the removal of troops from these areas is the necessary first step in establishing the unity of the working class and mobilising Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim workers in a joint struggle against the government and the LTTE.

The JVP and its union have reacted to the SEP motion in the CBEU because their pro-war jingoism is becoming increasingly unpopular, not only at the Central Bank, but more broadly. For all its claims to defend workers and its occasional socialist rhetoric, the JVP demands that working people sacrifice for the war. While spending billions of rupees on the military, the government has repeatedly turned down the wage demands of sections of public sector workers saying there is no money.

As the SEP motion explained: “The huge war expenditure is being imposed on the backs of working people through the destruction of living standards and social conditions and democratic rights are being attacked... Inflation is now at 17.3 percent. The rupee is sliding against the US dollar. Every struggle launched by workers, students and the oppressed for their pressing needs is suppressed in the name of the war and those who fight for them are branded as LTTE supporters.”

Without a struggle against war, it is impossible to defend even the most elementary rights and conditions of workers, as the role of the SLCBEU graphically demonstrates. During this year’s pay talks, the SLCBEU accepted a salary formula that discriminates heavily against lower grade employees and praised the Central Bank governor for his “flexibility” in granting demands. The formula was only changed through the intervention of the CBEU.

The SLCBEU concluded its leaflet last month by denouncing the CBEU leadership for its “unpatriotic activities” and making the following appeal: “We further urge you to join hands with the Sri Lankan Central Bank Employees, the trade union in the Sri Lankan Central Bank, which loves the country, raises the voice for a national economy, stands for the problems of central bank employees and is therefore committed to common aims excluding personal aims.”

It is precisely this defence of the country, the national economy and the war that is becoming increasingly unpopular. None of the 600 or so CBEU members has resigned to join the JVP’s SLCBEU. But there is a dangerous logic to the SLCBEU’s leaflet. The failure to make any political inroads will not stop the SLCBEU leadership from resorting to other, more sinister methods, as the JVP has done in the past.

The SEP will be initiating a campaign in the working class to expose the SLCBEU’s threats and to defend the CBEU leadership against any further provocations.



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