

Sri Lanka: Oppose the JVP threats against the SEP

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka call on workers and young people to condemn the threat against the leadership of the Central Bank Employees Union (CBEU) by supporters of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

In response to a political resolution passed at the CBEU annual general meeting in September, the JVP-aligned Sri Lanka Central Bank Employees Union (SLCBEU) issued a scurrilous leaflet branding CBEU president K.B. Mavikumbura and CBEU treasurer M.W. Piyaratna as “Sinhala Tigers”—that is, Sinhalese supporters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Mavikumbura and Piyaratna both support the SEP, which has consistently opposed both the LTTE and successive Colombo governments.

The SLCBEU leaflet was not only slanderous, but as everyone in Sri Lanka knows, a menacing threat in conditions where military-backed death squads have murdered or “disappeared” hundreds of people over the past two years. In the language of communal politics, anyone who is branded a “Sinhala Tiger” is a traitor and should be treated accordingly. The SEP is not inclined to take such threats lightly. We recall only too vividly the late 1980s when JVP gunmen killed hundreds of political opponents and trade unionists who opposed their jingoistic campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord. Three of our own comrades were murdered.

In the 1980s, the JVP claimed to be socialist and nominally opposed the right-wing United National Party government. Today the JVP openly supports the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and is one of the most strident advocates of its renewed communal war against the LTTE. It is not just the SEP that has been targeted by the government and its JVP backers, but anyone who opposes the war or fights for their basic rights and living standards.

In July 2006 as Rajapakse was about to launch the first military offensive in the East, a leader of the JVP-aligned Patriotic National Movement, Elle Gunawansa, appeared on state-owned TV to denounced striking port workers as “anti-national forces” who were engaged in “sabotage”. Since then government ministers and chauvinist supporters of the war have levelled similar accusations of treason against striking plantation workers, university staff, teachers, health workers and others.

The JVP-aligned Inter University Student Federation uses the same methods of intimidation to stifle discussion and debate on university campuses. Its members threatened to physically attack ISSE members at Peradeniya University near Kandy in August as they were campaigning against civil war in Sri Lanka and the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The JVP has jettisoned its empty anti-imperialist rhetoric of the past and now embraces the US as a useful ally in the communal war in Sri Lanka.

The SEP and ISSE bluntly say to workers and students: this is not your war. Ever since independence, the ruling elites stirred up communal hatreds to divide workers against each other. In 1983, the UNP plunged the country into war as it confronted a mass movement against its pro-market policies. All of the major parties have proved incapable of ending the conflict precisely because they are mired in the politics of Sinhala supremacism. Opposition to the war does not mean support for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), whose Tamil separatism represents the interest of the Tamil bourgeoisie, not Tamil workers and farmers.

The JVP’s threat against the CBEU leaders was precisely because the SEP is campaigning to unify workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—against the war and the relentless onslaught on living standards. The resolution that was passed at the CBEU annual general meeting declared that it was impossible to defend jobs,

wages and conditions without a program to end the war. In struggle after struggle over the past two years, workers have been sold out by their union leaders who refuse to challenge the government's demands for sacrifice for the war effort.

The JVP-aligned unions have proven to be the most duplicitous. For all its militant words, the JVP backs the war to the hilt and its unions have repeatedly caved in. The reason is obvious. The government is spending billions of rupees on the military and has just increased defence spending again in the latest budget. It is no wonder that government ministers constantly tell striking workers, protesting students and angry farmers that there is no money for wage rises, decent education or rural subsidies. And the JVP agrees.

The SLCBEU leaflet attacks the SEP's demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of troops from the North and East, claiming that the army is defending the people. Far from protecting people, the armed forces maintain a system of de facto martial law and use the most brutal methods to suppress any opposition, particularly by Tamils. The demand for their withdrawal does not signify support for the LTTE, but solidarity with working people in the North and East and the defence of their basic democratic rights. It is the elementary 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 remainder of the SLCBEU leaflet consists of lies, denunciations of "unpatriotic activities" and appeals to "love of country". It declares that CBEU president K.B. Mavikumbura has been "leading a project for years to back LTTE terrorism" and insinuates he has been helping the LTTE to plan a repeat of the 1996 bombing of the Central Bank that claimed 86 lives. The long record of the SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) demonstrates that we have opposed the terrorism of both the LTTE and the armed forces. In 1996, the RCL publicly condemned the bombing of the Central Bank, pointing out that it would sow bitter communal divisions among working people.

The JVP denounces anyone who does not back the government and its communal war as a "Tiger" and a traitor. Likewise, the LTTE declares that anyone who does not accept it as the "sole representative of the Tamil nation" must be a government collaborator. Both sides in this communal conflict have not hesitated to ruthlessly deal with their political opponents.

The SEP emphatically rejects these false alternatives:

the Colombo government and the LTTE represent rival sections of the ruling class and both defend the profit system. The real alternative for working people is to build an independent political movement to fight for a workers' and farmers' government based on socialist policies as part of the broader struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

The ferocity of this attack on the SEP is a sharp warning to all workers. As the burdens of a deeply unpopular war provoke opposition from working people, the government and its chauvinist supporters will inevitably intensify their witchhunt against anyone who challenges them. Amid the clamour of patriotic fervour for war, the Rajapakse government already has police state measures in place to ban strikes, impose censorship and detain without trial. Military-backed death squads are operating. And in the trade unions and among students, the JVP plays a crucial role for the government in fingering and threatening any opponents.

In the late 1980s, the CBEU, under the leadership of the RCL, waged a powerful campaign in Sri Lanka and internationally for a united front of working class organisations to defend workers against state repression and the fascistic attacks of JVP hit squads. The working class faces similar dangers today and must develop its own class response to the threat. Above all, that means building the SEP as the independent socialist alternative to all of the parties of the ruling class.

The SEP and ISSE calls on all workers and youth to campaign in their workplaces, schools and universities for motions condemning the threat against our comrades in the CBEU leadership. This must be part of a far broader counteroffensive by the working class and young people against the poisonous atmosphere of chauvinism and militarism that dominates official politics and every aspect of life in Sri Lanka. We call on workers and youth to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, the web site of the international Trotskyist movement, study our program and apply to join the SEP and ISSE.



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