

Sri Lanka: ISSE demonstration demands the release of jailed Iranian students

Our reporters
14 March 2008

The Sri Lankan chapter of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) held a demonstration in Colombo on Monday demanding the immediate release of left-wing students jailed by the Iranian government of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The demonstration was part of the ISSE's international campaign to defend these students.

On December 4, Iranian police arrested 33 students who demonstrated in commemoration of "Students' Day", which marks the killing of three students by police in 1953 during protests against visiting US Vice President Richard Nixon. In January this year, more students were arrested while demonstrating against the arrest of their colleagues.

The ISSE and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) demand the release of these students and the withdrawal of all charges against them. As part of the campaign, ISSE and SEP supporters distributed thousands of copies of the WSWs article, "Iranian government intensifies crackdown on left-wing opposition", at Colombo University and workplaces in the capital.

From 2 p.m., a demonstration was held in front of the Iranian embassy. Participants raised slogans demanding the release of the members of Students for Freedom and Equality, also known as the Radical Left, and opposing US militarism. Some of the placards read: "Release jailed Iranian students immediately", "Stop persecution of left-wing students", "Stop US threats of war against Iran", "Withdraw imperialist troops from the Middle East" and "Fight for international socialism against war and repression."

Alongside the placards, written in Sinhala, Tamil, English and Farsi, photographs of some of the jailed students were displayed. Leaflets were distributed to passers-by and the event attracted the attention of students returning home after school.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias had informed Iranian

embassy officials a week earlier that the ISSE would deliver a letter demanding the students' release. Officials, however, refused to appear to accept the letter, despite several attempts to contact them.

The Iranian ambassador arrived in a car during the demonstration. Aware of the protest, he left after about 15 minutes via the back door. When the ISSE's Sri Lanka convener, Kapila Fernando, tried to hand the letter to the security officer in charge of the gate, he refused to accept it.

After demonstrating for an hour at the embassy, which is located in a wealthy and secluded area, the ISSE changed the venue to the busy Fort Railway Station, located in central Colombo, where thousands of workers were returning home. More than a thousand leaflets were distributed in less than an hour.

WSWS reporters spoke to some of those who stopped to discuss the issues.

T, a Postal Department mail sorter, said: "This is the first time I have seen this kind of event. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) often holds demonstrations here and there but I haven't seen them pay any attention to international incidents. I was watching the agitation curiously. There was a small number of participants, but I understand its message is powerful and it will get the attention of workers internationally. Only after you explained, I realise that Sri Lanka had a tradition of this kind of agitation when the Lanka Sama Samaja Party was fighting for socialism.

"As we are opposed to the Middle Eastern wars, I firmly believe that the war in Sri Lanka should be stopped as well. However, it cannot be stopped in the present set up, and even if it were, repressive policies would continue. There is no difference between the Iranian and Sri Lankan governments in their attacks on democratic rights.

"I have many more things to say, but the present

security situation in the country prevents me. Not only ordinary people but members of parliament are abducted or murdered for their opposition to the policies of the government. However, I must add that this is an entirely new experience for me.”

One young person among a group of youth who were going home said: “We first thought there was no use holding a demonstration here in Sri Lanka demanding the release of Iranian students. Now, after your explanation, we think it is meaningful as it aims at the revival of an international tradition.”

A middle-age railway worker commented: “It is very important to raise your voice on behalf of students. They are our future generation. This is the first time I have seen a campaign in Sri Lanka over an Iranian issue.”

A Sri Lanka Telecom worker said: “The Iranian government put these students in jail when they were protesting US war threats. I realised that you are opposing the US threats against Iran and demanding the release of arrested Iranian students. Here you are demonstrating to defend them even though they are not a part of the Fourth International. As far as the democratic rights of all are concerned, that is a great tradition.”

After concluding the demonstration at Fort station, the ISSE and SEP held a meeting, which will be reported on the WSWS at a later date.

Below is the letter delivered to the Iranian embassy:

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

President Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Khamenei,

We are writing to demand the immediate and unconditional release of all members of the group Azady Barabary (Students for Freedom and Equality) currently arrested and detained by your government. We have included below a list of their names. We also demand that you drop all charges against them. These students are not guilty of any crime. They have engaged in a legitimate protest against the war plans of the United States and the policies of the Iranian political establishment.

They are not affiliated to our organisation. But, we, along with students and workers all over the world, will keep following their treatment carefully and publicising their cases until they are freed and their unjust persecution ends. Following their unconditional release, they should not be subjected to any further witch-hunt for their political actions and must be free to express their ideas openly.

What has outraged us further are reports that Iranian authorities have subjected the arrested students to torture

and various forms of physical and psychological abuse. We also learnt that they may be under pressure to make false confessions before television cameras. Here in Sri Lanka, we are particularly familiar with the dire consequences of such notorious methods. Successive governments have used similar anti-democratic and repressive methods to silence any political opposition while prosecuting a civil war for twenty-five years.

It is important to note that the US puppet, Shah Reza Pahlavi, used the same methods to suppress legitimate political expression and actions of the working people and the youth. We would like to state that the initial wave of student arrests, in December last year, occurred after they organised a demonstration to mark Students’ Day, which commemorates the murder of four students by the Shah during the visit of US Vice President Richard Nixon in 1953.

The ISSE speaks on behalf of students and workers in Sri Lanka and around the world who are deeply opposed to the past and present war-mongering policies of the US government against Iran. The students that you have placed behind bars were engaged in protests against US imperialism. Their arrest will only hinder any genuine struggle against imperialist aggression, which endangers the population of the entire region and beyond.

The imprisonment and mistreatment of the courageous students by your government is a grievous assault on democratic and human rights. It strengthens the hands of the imperialist militarists themselves, who exploit the injustices committed by your government to justify their war plans against Iran.

See Also:

ISSE demonstration to free Iranian students calls for international unity of workers

[19 February 2008]

An interview with an Iranian activist on arrests of left-wing students

[28 January 2008]

Iranian government intensifies crackdown on left-wing opposition

[28 January 2008]



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