

Sri Lankan police release arrested SEP member

The the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
25 September 2008

Sri Lankan police have finally released Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member Velummailum Kamalthasan and his brother-in-law Santhiralingam Ilancheliyan. The release took place at the office of the Negombo area magistrate on Tuesday.

The two men had been detained illegally at the Negombo police station lock-up since their arrest on September 15. Their release followed a determined campaign by the SEP and protest letters to the Sri Lankan authorities from readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*. The SEP and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) would like to thank our supporters in Sri Lanka and internationally for their assistance securing the freedom of the two men.

Kamalthasan and Ilancheliyan were presented before a magistrate at 4 p.m. on Monday—a week after being detained. The police told the magistrate that they would both be released as investigations had been completed and no evidence of “suspicious activities” had been found. By “suspicious activities,” the police mean ties to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or involvement in “terrorist” activities.

The police provided no explanation as to why the two men had been held for so long or why the authorities repeatedly ignored the SEP’s representations on behalf of the detainees. Kamalthasan is a longstanding member of the SEP, which is well known not only for its opposition to the Sri Lankan government’s war but also to the LTTE’s bourgeois nationalist program.

Kamalthasan and Ilancheliyan were arrested by a team of Negombo police while preparing to go to Colombo by bus. The police ordered them out of the bus then took them to the police station despite the fact that the two men produced police registration documents to verify their identity. They were detained without charge for nine days pending “further

inquiries”.

Their protracted detention was not only a flagrant abuse of basic democratic rights, but was also illegal. Even under the country’s draconian emergency measures, which give security forces wide powers of detention without charge, detainees are meant to have certain limited rights. The police eventually claimed that they had a detention order but had failed to show it to Kamalthasan and Ilancheliyan, as required by law, and could not produce it when asked by the SEP and the party’s lawyer.

Since President Mahinda Rajapakse plunged the country back to war in mid-2006, the security forces have intensified their repression against the country’s Tamil minority. Identity checks and police sweeps through predominantly Tamil areas are routine. Hundreds of Tamils have been arbitrarily detained without trial for weeks, months and even years under the emergency powers and anti-terrorist legislation.

Kamalthasan and Ilancheliyan were held in the police lockup with two other Tamils—Sinnai Gopalan and Jesuthasan Ampalalan. They were arrested in Negombo on the same day and also released on Tuesday after the police found no involvement in “suspicious activities”.

The belated admission by police that they had no evidence against Kamalthasan and Ilancheliyan simply underscores the arbitrary nature of the detentions. Deeply imbued with communal prejudice, the security forces, which are largely drawn from the island’s Sinhala majority, regard all Tamils as the enemy. Responding to SEP demands for the release of its party member and his relative, Negombo Head Quarters Inspector Somasiri Liyanage blurted out: “How can we say clearly who is and who isn’t a terrorist in this context?... We have to treat every Tamil with suspicion”.

Increasingly, the government and the security forces are acting outside the law. Human rights organisations have documented hundreds of cases of abductions, “disappearances” and murders in which all the evidence points to the involvement of death squads acting under the orders or with the complicity of the security forces. The media has also been targeted. A growing number of journalists critical of the government have been detained, abducted or killed. In virtually none of these cases has any member of the police or military been charged, let alone convicted.

The determination of the Negombo police to keep Kamalthasan in custody despite being told that he was an SEP member is a warning that police repression is being intensified. The SEP has a long record of opposing not only the government, its communal war and systematic discrimination against Tamils, but also the LTTE’s separatist program and its terrorist attacks on innocent Sinhalese. As a result of its principled stand, the SEP has confronted repression by both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE.

In 1998, the LTTE detained four SEP members in Kilinochchi for campaigning for the party’s program. They were held for more than seven weeks before the LTTE finally bowed to an intensive international campaign waged by the SEP and the WSWs for their release. In 2003, in the wake of a ceasefire and the start of peace talks, LTTE leaders on Kayts Island, off the northern Jaffna peninsula, issued death threats against SEP members. The LTTE was seeking to oust the SEP as the elected leadership of a local fisherman’s cooperative. One SEP member was physically attacked and seriously injured.

The arrest of Kamalthasan and Ilancheliyan is certainly part of a wide police crackdown on Tamils, particularly those who have been forced to flee the intensified fighting in the island’s North. The Rajapakse government has recently announced a census of all Tamils who have moved from the northern province into the western province, which includes Colombo. Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, previously called on all recent Tamil arrivals to return to their homes because “the LTTE mingles with these people to infiltrate these areas”.

The Rajapakse government is facing a deepening political crisis. Despite its intense communal

propaganda, the war is deeply unpopular. Broad layers of the population are affected not only by the immediate death and destruction but also the economic impact of the conflict. Huge military expenditures combined with rising international prices for oil and food have led to rampant inflation, now hovering around 30 percent.

The government has responded to strikes and protests by workers, farmers and students in the same manner that it deals with Tamils. Rajapakse has treated those fighting for higher wages, greater government assistance or improved services as traitors, accusing them of undermining the war effort. The detention of SEP member Kamalthasan is a sharp warning that the police-state measures can and will be extended from the Tamil minority to the working class as a whole.

We urge all of our readers and supporters to seriously study the SEP’s perspective and program. We are the only party in Sri Lanka that opposes all forms for racism and communalism and campaigns to unite workers, regardless of ethnicity and language, in the struggle for socialism. We call for the immediate release of all detainees held under the emergency powers and the abolition of these anti-democratic measures. To end the war, we demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all security forces in the North and East as part of the struggle to unify the working class around the perspective of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, in the fight for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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