Over 100,000 demonstrate in London against Sri Lankan war

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Over 100,000 people, mostly Tamils came from across the UK to march in central London on Saturday demanding an end to the war in Sri Lanka and the atrocities carried out by the military. During the march itself reports came in of a cluster bomb attack that killed 39 civilians and wounded 128 more.

Saturday's demonstration was the largest ever of its kind and took the organizers, who only expected a few thousand to turn up, completely by surprise. The police were likewise unprepared, and central London ground to a halt as the march made its way from the Tate Britain gallery past Downing Street, the residence of UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown, to Temple Station where speakers addressed the enormous crowd. Only a few were able to make their speeches before the police demanded an end to the rally claiming the organizers did not have permission to use a public address system.

Despite the unprecedented nature of the demonstration, a similar one of 50,000 people in Toronto the previous day and other demonstrations across Europe, none of the British or international TV news channels or Sunday newspapers reported it.

The march was dominated by home-made banners and placards condemning the slaughter of Tamil civilians by the Sri Lankan military. Others attacked India for sending in troops and the silence of the "international community" over the humanitarian crisis that has developed. The BBC was criticized for failing to report the killings and the British government for its role in Sri Lankan history. Young and old alike shouted, "Stop the killing of Tamil people", "End the War Now"! "Drop food and medicines—not bombs".

There were calls for self-determination for Tamil Eelam and shouts of support for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam but there were few red and yellow Tamil Eelam flags and no Tamil Tigers flags.

Leaflets were handed out by several Tamil nationalist organisations, but their perspective was limited to putting pressure on various governments to intervene. Typical was that put out by the main organizer, the Tamils Forum, which called for people to "pressure the UK government to prevail upon Sri Lanka to stop the genocide" and write to their MPs. A petition was circulated calling for Brown to remove the LTTE from the list of banned terrorist organizations.

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party handed out thousands of leaflets in English and Tamil of the January 29 perspective article from the *World Socialist Web Site* "Troops out of northern and eastern Sri Lanka!" It denounced the criminal assault being unleashed by the Sri Lankan military, criticised the bankrupt perspective of the LTTE and called for the unity of the Tamil, Sinhala and international working class. Demonstrators clamoured for the leaflet, and after they had read it several came back for more and began distributing it themselves.

Many had heard of the *World Socialist Web Site* and were eager to express their views. V. Vijay said, "First of all we have gathered here to stop the war against the Tamil people. It is ethnic mass murder. Afterwards we should talk about a peace process and solution.

"The Sri Lankan government has used Sinhala chauvinism for a long time to carry out war against the Tamils. It wants to eliminate the rights of Tamils using the 'war on terror'.

"None of the imperialist countries are willing to stop the war, particularly India, which has used our ethnic conflict for its own purposes and fomented conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils for a long period. India wants to establish its own regional power and markets.

"People are conscious that Sinhala and Tamil people should solve the national conflict, establish permanent peace without involving imperialism.

"We have to show solidarity with our people and show our anger. However, I don't think this movement is going to stop the war. Mass demonstrations were carried out in 2003 against the war on Iraq but it didn't stop the US.

"We should appeal to all people to fight to end the war", V. Vijay concluded.

Govindaraj [Indian Tamil], a member of a Tamil youth organization who has come from Manchester to London to start a hunger strike in protest at the war said, "We want to express our anger at the world powers. It is not simply genocide; it is predetermined structural and physical genocide against the Tamil people in Sri Lanka by the world powers.

"What we want immediately is to stop the war because Tamils have

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been killed using the ‘War on Terror’. The imperialist countries have turned the ‘liberation struggle’ into a mere fight against terrorists in order to mask the real issues behind it. As a result, the Tamil people have been killed and their rights attacked.

“If India wants to stop the war it could do so, but it won’t because of its own geo-strategic interests. The Sri Lankan government uses the location of Sri Lanka [close to India] to sell itself to India. But Indian people are not supporting this war, only the government is doing so.

“We should push our [Indian] government to impose peace in Sri Lanka. What we want is to protect Tamils in Sri Lanka,” Govindaraj added.

K, a Tamil youth, who did not want his full name used because he feared being targeted by the Sri Lankan government in future, said that he had only come to the UK a few months ago after being released from jail in Sri Lanka where he had been badly tortured. He said that though he was a refugee and immigrant worker and was unable to get time off to come to the demonstration, “I am ready to sacrifice my job in order to show my anger against this war”.

“The Sri Lankan government won’t give anything to the Tamil masses,” K explained. “It wants to keep Tamils as slaves.

“Tamil people are living in fear in Colombo. Any time anything could happen to them. No one is there to protect them. People are afraid of being identified and targeted by the government if we have relatives in LTTE held area”, he continued.

“I have lost my relatives in this bombardment. My relatives in Colombo and Vavuniya are unable to mourn or cry for them. This is cruel and criminal war against the Tamils.

“I know Tamil people who refuse to come to the so-called ‘safe zones’ after they were bombarded by the government and because they are going to be held like criminals in camps. The government did it before and is going to do so again. Most people have a relative in the LTTE and they are going to be the first target of the government. I know what will happen if they move to the Sri Lankan army area.

“The government is bombarding the area to terrify Tamils saying they supported the LTTE and joined them. Through the aggression, shelling and killing the government expects to eliminate the Tamil struggle, but it won’t happen like that. More Tamils will take up arms again because every day they see the atrocities carried out by the Sri Lankan army”, K said.

Paris demonstration

Members and supporters of the SEP in France also found strong support for the perspective to unite workers across ethnic lines based on socialist internationalism during their campaign in Paris.

More than 1,000 people gathered in the La Chappelle area for a demonstration over the war. Although organised by LTTE front organizations, Tamil youth organisations and Tamil shop owners, many people were participating independently angered not only by the actions of the Sri Lankan government but also the Indian government and the international community, which is backing the Colombo ruling class.

SEP members distributed the statement “Troops out of north and eastern Sri Lanka” and spoke to many Tamil youth who expressed their concerns about the innocent people who are losing their lives because of the Rajapkse government and the military, which is using powerful weapons such as multi-barrel rockets, mortars and airplanes.

“Where is the United Nations? And where is the international community? Why they can’t stop the war”? one asked.

Another youth, Ravee, said, “I have come with our sports club to oppose the war. We are not supporters of the LTTE, but we are gathering here in solidarity with our people who are being killed in barbaric military attacks every day.

“They are living in a very inferior situation in Wanni without any food, medicines or shelter. Today I heard about 3,000 Indian army [soldiers who] landed in Mullaitheevu. Rajapakse is very cunning man. He announced a two-day cease fire, but in reality, he deployed his army with the support of the Indian army to prepare another assault against Wanni peoples and the LTTE”, Ravee concluded.

Kandeepan said, “Once I was a supporter of the EPRLF (one of the Tamil national movements, now with the Rajapakse government) but now I do not support them. In the past I lost many of my family members. This war is destroying many Tamils in Sri Lanka”.

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