

Sri Lankan government detains plantation union leaders

M. Vasanthan

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In a blatant attempt by the Rajapakse government to intimidate plantation workers and the working class as a whole, the Sri Lankan police have invoked the government's draconian emergency regulations to detain two leaders of trade unions based in the plantation estates in the country's central hills.

The Terrorist Investigation Division arrested Up-Country People Front (UPF) youth wing leader Thalamutthu Suthaharan and Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) General Secretary L. Bharathithasan at Thalawakelle in the Nuwara-Eliya district on October 21 and 23 respectively. No charges have been laid against the men; instead they are being held under three-month detention orders.

The police have vaguely accused both of having connections with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was crushed by the Sri Lankan military in May last year. These flimsy accusations are hardly accidental. Throughout the final years of the military assault on the LTTE, President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government branded any workers taking industrial action as "terrorist supporters," accusing them of assisting the LTTE's cause.

Sri Lanka's police force is also notorious for carrying out pro-government frame-ups and victimisations. In order to justify the detention of the two union leaders, the police informed union officials and relatives that they are "under interrogation". Yet, nearly a month after their arrest, no charges have been framed and the men have not been produced before a court.

The government's hand in these arrests was shown during the latest parliamentary vote to extend the emergency powers. On November 9, Prime Minister D.M. Jayaratne told parliament: "Up country (central hills) youths were given arms training in Kilinochchi by the LTTE. Two people were arrested who had connections with it and brought arms

to the up-country."

Jayaratne did not name the two people but all indications are that he meant Suthaharan and Bharathithasan. The prime minister reported that they had been arrested with arms but did not substantiate the allegation. Jayaratne added: "Explosives and communication equipments were kept in the North, East and Central provinces and Colombo. These have to be found out. The emergency must be extended."

Jayaratne's claims have been echoed by the Central Province Deputy Inspector General of Police Gamini Navaratne who told a DPF official there were 2,500 kilograms of explosives in the Central Province. These vague allegations indicate that a broader witch-hunt is being prepared against plantation workers in the name of "searching for explosives" and people linked to "terrorists."

Most central hills plantation workers are Tamils, as is much of the population of the island's north and east. During the civil war, plantation workers and youth were particularly subjected to harassment and accusations of links to the LTTE.

Suthaharan and Bharathithasan are being detained amid an intensifying climate of repression as the government prepares to implement austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund. In the annual budget due to be presented next Monday, the government has pledged to slash the deficit from 10 to 8 percent of gross domestic product. Among the measures foreshadowed are tax increases, subsidy cuts that will further push up the prices of essentials, cutbacks in health and education, and privatisations.

The Rajapakse government is attempting to silence opposition parties, and pre-empt or suppress resistance by workers, slum dwellers and students to its pro-business measures. It is using the military and police-state methods developed during the civil war to impose the burden of the

country's economic crisis on working people and youth. Since September, police have arrested at least 33 students, with the government also claiming that students are planning an "insurgency".

During the war, arbitrary detention without trial, torture and extra-judicial killings by death squads associated with the military were commonly used. After the LTTE's collapse, the army herded more than a quarter of a million Tamil civilians—men, women and children—into military-run detention camps. Thousands of young Tamils were interrogated and dragged off to unknown centres for "LTTE suspects" where many remain in custody without trial.

The political repression only escalated after January's presidential election, when the military detained Rajapakse's rival presidential candidate, former Army Commander, General Sarath Fonseka. Since then, despite the end of the war, Rajapakse has extended the state of emergency every month, claiming that a "terrorist threat" still remains. Under the emergency regulations, Rajapakse has sweeping powers, including to outlaw strikes and protests, censor the media, and detain individuals without trial.

The government's real target is the working class, and the struggles that will inevitably erupt as the austerity program intensifies. Discontent is already brewing among plantation workers, who are among the most oppressed layers of the Sri Lankan working class. During the past several months, workers have taken up struggles in some estates against increasing workloads.

Last September, hundreds of thousands of plantation workers engaged in strikes and other protests to demand a 750-rupee (\$US6.70) daily wage. The Ceylon Workers Congress, a member of the ruling coalition, and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, affiliated to the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP), openly betrayed this struggle by signing a government-backed deal for 405 rupees.

Tens of thousands of workers continued go-slow protests for several days, refusing to accept this sell-out. However, other trade unions, including the DWC, UPF and All Ceylon Estate Workers Union, which claimed to oppose the deal, shut down the protests. The detention of Suthaharan and Bharathithasan shows that the government is desperate to head off any, even token opposition by the unions.

Last year, Bharathithasan contested the Central Provincial

council election as a UPF candidate on behalf of Rajapakse's ruling alliance. He left the UPF, however, after a tussle for its leadership in April and joined the Democratic People Front (DPF) and its trade union wing, the DWC, which are in an alliance with the opposition UNP. Bharathithasan was a DPF candidate in this April's general election but failed to secure a seat.

DPF leader Mano Ganeshan has denied the police allegations against Bharathithasan. He told the WSWS: "The arrest of Bharathithasan is a political reprisal meted out to our party. It is one of those recent onslaughts faced by the opposition groups targeted by the government."

The Socialist Equality Party unconditionally condemns the detention of Suthaharan and Bharathithasan and calls on all workers, students and youth to demand their immediate release. This outright attack on basic democratic rights is a warning to the entire working class that the government is preparing to escalate its repressive methods.

In making this call, we warn against the treacherous role of both the UPF and DPF. While DPF leader Ganeshan has publicly condemned the arrest of Bharathithasan, the DPF has taken no action to defend its union leader. When the WSWS inquired yesterday, Ganeshan said his party had not yet decided on any campaign to release Bharathithasan.

For its part, the UPF has cynically washed its hands of Suthaharan. When the WSWS inquired about his arrest, UPF general secretary Lawrence declared: "He is not our member. His activities are against UPF policy." Lawrence refused to elaborate. Suthaharan has been the leader of the UPF's youth wing since 2002. His father is an assistant secretary of the UPF's workers wing. As a partner in Rajapakse's ruling coalition, the UPF clearly does not want to antagonise the government.

In opposition to the stance of the UPF and DPF, which can only assist the government's witch-hunt, the SEP urges plantation workers and other workers everywhere to demand the release of Suthaharan and Bharathithasan, and all other political detainees.



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