SEP launches campaign to release Sri Lankan political prisoners

Statement Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party is launching a campaign to demand the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners detained under military and police custody. The campaign is inseparable from the broader struggle to defend the democratic rights of the working class and rural masses from the attacks of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

At least 6,000 Tamil political prisoners are being held without charge as “terrorist suspects” in undisclosed prison camps run by the military. Following the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, the army herded 280,000 civilians into detention centres. While most, but not all, have now been “resettled,” some 11,000 young people were interrogated and dragged away for alleged LTTE sympathies. About 5,000 have been released but remain under close military surveillance.

Another several hundred Tamils, taken into custody on various flimsy allegations related to the island’s 30-year civil war, remain in remand prisons. Those detained after May 2009 were held under the country’s draconian Emergency Regulations, while others are being kept under the equally anti-democratic Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

From the outset, the war was bound up with the suppression of the struggles of workers. Anti-Tamil chauvinism has been the chief ideological tool of the ruling class to shore up its rule and divide the working class. The police-state apparatus and laws developed in three decades of war have repeatedly been used by successive governments against workers seeking to defend their jobs, wages, welfare measures and free education and health service.

Essential services orders promulgated under the Emergency Regulations have been used to ban industrial action. Soldiers have been deployed as strike-breakers and used alongside police against protesting workers. Governments have also used the emergency and other powers to silence or suppress their political opponents—including to jail General Sarath Fonseka, who, despite his central role in prosecuting the communal war, was regarded by President Rajapakse as a dangerous political rival.

Amid great fanfare, the government announced in August that it was withdrawing the Emergency Regulations. What a sham! This cosmetic move was not out of any sympathy for the basic democratic rights of working people, but to appease the US, European Union and India, which have been exploiting the issue of human rights in Sri Lanka to further their interests in the region. No sooner had the Emergency Regulations lapsed than the government re-imposed the same measures in a different guise.

President Rajapakse proclaimed amendments to the PTA for the continued detention of political prisoners under the guise of “rehabilitation.” Under the PTA, detained persons can be held without trial for an indefinite period, extended periodically on the “authorisation” of senior defence ministry officials. The PTA also allows for confessions, including those extracted by torture, to be used as evidence in court cases against detainees.

At the same time, the government has begun to use the Essential Public Services Act to issue essential services orders—the first being to ban a one-day strike by employees at the government-owned Ceylon Electricity Board. Under the Act, industrial action as well as any campaign for workers’ rights can be prohibited and subjected to penalties, including imprisonment, fines and the seizing of properties of those convicted.

The government has also revived the Public Security Act, allowing the president to call out the three armed forces in all 22 districts of Sri Lanka. This means the government can

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mobilise the military under the pretext of “maintaining law and order” to suppress any threat to the existing capitalist order.

The proclamation of these laws is a devastating indictment, not only of the Rajapakse government, but the capitalist class as a whole. In conditions of deepening economic crisis globally and in Sri Lanka, the bourgeoisie is utterly incapable of ruling through democratic means. Its “peace” is one of military occupation in the North and East of the island and preparations for class war against the working class.

Since the mass detention of Tamil political prisoners, two years have passed. However, not a single person has been charged, let alone tried and convicted. There are others in remand who were seized up to a decade ago, but many have not been charged.

Thousands languish in jail while the real criminals are in high government office. According to a UN expert panel, the military slaughtered about 40,000 Tamil civilians in the final months of the war. Those implicated in these war crimes include President Rajapakse, his brother Gotabhaya Rajapakse, and other top officials and military commanders, including General Fonseka.

The main opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—occasionally accuse the Rajapakse government of being undemocratic, but their protests are both limited and completely hypocritical. Both parties fully backed the communal war, insisted that war crimes did not take place, and voted to renew Rajapakse’s emergency powers.

The Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and other Tamil parties claim to defend the rights of detained Tamils, but their demand to “charge them, or release them” accepts the legitimacy of the mass detentions. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insists that all the detainees should be immediately and unconditionally released—there are no charges let alone convictions against most of them. A few have been charged and convicted—on the basis of their own confessions.

In reality, the TNA has nothing but contempt for the democratic rights of Tamils. It uses its campaign as a bargaining chip to pressure the government to reach a power-sharing arrangement that will provide the Tamil bourgeoisie with some privileges. To support its ambitions, the TNA looks to the US, Europe and India for backing—a reactionary course that only assists in the machinations of these powers.

The SEP calls on the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—to support our campaign to free all political prisoners by joining our protests, public meetings and other activities.

We warn that the police-state methods adopted against the Tamil minority will inevitably be used against workers and the rural masses as the government seeks to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of working people. Already the security forces have been mobilised against protesting Free Trade Zone workers and to enforce the first evictions of some 75,000 families from their shanties in Colombo as part of Rajapakse’s grandiose vision to turn the capital into a financial powerhouse of South Asia.

The SEP—and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League—is the only party that has consistently opposed the war, defended the rights of the Tamil minority and demanded the repeal of all repressive legislation. The defence of basic democratic rights is integrally bound up with the political struggle to independently mobilise the working class against the crisis-ridden profit system, which is the source of war and the assault on the living standards of working people.

To address the unresolved democratic issues that flow from six decades of communal politics and three decades of war, the SEP advances the demand for a Constituent Assembly, comprised of democratically elected representatives. This demand is indissolubly bound up with the political fight that must be waged by the working class to lead the rural masses in the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist measures.

The SEP fights for the establishment of a United Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral component of the struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics throughout the Indian sub-continent and internationally. We call on workers and youth to join and build the SEP as the necessary revolutionary leadership to politically fight for this perspective.

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