

SEP campaigns at J'pura University for release of political prisoners

Our correspondents
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The campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) to demand the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Sri Lanka won an important response among students at the Sri Jayewardenepura (J'pura) University, near Colombo. University students are also confronting an assault on democratic rights as discontent and protest grows to the erosion of their study and living conditions.

Saman Bandara, a final year student, told SEP campaigners: "We can imagine the situation [of Tamils] in the North and East where every aspect of their social life has been militarised by the government. Students here are facing repression because we oppose the privatisation of universities and other attacks on education. Universities are also subjected to militarisation. The authorities have fixed CCTV cameras to observe our movements. The security of these institutions has been assigned to companies under the defence ministry. New students are forced to undergo training in military camps."

At least 6,000 Tamil political prisoners are still being held without charge in undisclosed detention centres run by the security forces in the North and East of the island. Many have been detained since shortly after the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009 when the military arbitrarily arrested some 11,000 young men and women. The 5,000 who have been released remain under tight monitoring and control by the security forces.

The SEP and ISSE warn that the draconian measures directed against Tamil youth by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse are part of a wider assault on the democratic rights of the working class. The

police state built up over a quarter century of civil war will be turned against workers as they come forward to defend their living standards, which are already under attack via the government's austerity measures.

Bandara responded to the SEP's call for a unified campaign by saying: "To defeat these common attacks, the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil people is necessary. When you look at the campaign of Occupy Wall Street [around the world], you can understand the possibility of such a unity." He is part of a layer of young people who are increasingly opposed to the divisive communal politics exploited by successive governments to divide workers and maintain their rule.

Previously, the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), had a considerable following at the J'pura University and other campuses. That support has been significantly eroded by the disenchantment among students with the IUSF's thuggish methods, its Sinhala chauvinist politics and its betrayal of student struggles. The JVP was in the forefront of backing the communal war against the LTTE and supported the arbitrary detention of Tamil youth.

The SEP campaign was important in making students aware of the continued mass detentions by the government and the military. Amid considerable fanfare, President Rajapakse recently ended the country's long-running state of emergency. However, the government retained all its anti-democratic powers, including extended detention without trial, under other legislation.

Bandara explained: "Actually we didn't know much about the Tamil political prisoners. The Sri Lankan media is almost silent on this issue. It is news for me to hear from you that there are some 6,000 political prisoners. Our student union didn't make us aware on

this issue. If they had organised a protest or any other campaign, we would be demanding the release of these prisoners. We would definitely take part.”

About 125 students from J’pura University were suspended last year. In August, the university’s vice chancellor handed over three students to police, alleging that they had participated in an attempted anti-state coup. They were detained without charge under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and were only released to forestall student opposition and protests.

A final year management student expressed his concerns about these methods to SEP campaigners: “The government has brought the situation of the North and East to the universities. Now the government is going to utilise the [security] forces that fought in the North against us. In every district they are going to establish army camps.”

Other students pointed to the arrest and trial of former general Sarath Fonseka. One student declared: “If political prisoners are to be released, you have to release the ex-army commander Fonseka.” Fonseka was jailed as part of a political vendetta after he unsuccessfully challenged Rajapakse in the January 2010 presidential election.

SEP campaigners agreed that the detention of Fonseka should also be opposed. He was not arrested because of the war crimes for which he and the government were responsible. Rather he was detained on trumped-up charges as a means of intimidating political opponents. The conviction of Fonseka was a warning of the methods to be used to suppress even limited political opposition.

During the discussions, students wanted to know about recent split in the JVP. One asked: “Don’t you think that this crisis is a result of the betrayal of the policies of its founding leader Rohana Wijeweera? Can we say that the dissidents are trying to revive Wijeweera’s Marxist policies?”

The SEP campaigners disagreed that the JVP was ever Marxist. Rather, despite its socialistic rhetoric and glorification of the armed struggle, it was mired in nationalism and Sinhala populism from the outset. It was based on peasant guerrillaism and was hostile to the working class, particularly Tamil plantation workers, and thus to the proletarian internationalism that is fundamental to Marxism.

Among students there is considerable distrust of the

JVP and its communal politics.

Sagara, a management student, explained: “We heard that the JVP held a protest in Kilinochchi on the issue of Tamil political prisoners. However, now we don’t see anything further about that campaign. They didn’t conduct a campaign in the south to mobilise students. If they are talking about Tamil political prisoners, it is a sham, as they supported the war.”

“I went to a meeting of the JVP dissident group in Kandy. They said they were fighting for socialism and opposed alliances with capitalist parties. I considered it as a good tendency.” However, after SEP campaigners explained the politics of the dissident faction and its role as a political trap for students, Sagara began to reconsider.

“I accept that if you are fighting for the socialism, you must fight for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil people. For that, you have to fight against the repression in the North and East. But I never heard such a thing at the JVP meeting I attended. You are the only party I have met in the south that fights to release the political prisoners,” he said.

A female graduate of J’pura University was enthusiastic about the SEP campaign. “When I was doing my degree course, fortunately I was selected for the free music classes of the late musician, Master Premasiri Kemadasa. In those music classes we were trained to sing anti-war songs, originally written by Bertolt Brecht.

“Those songs had a massive impact on my personal life and I opposed the civil war in Sri Lanka. But I never found any expression for that opposition in any political party, especially in political life at university.

“Under the influence of Sinhala racism during the war, many colleagues who sang anti-war songs with me in that choir went over to the camp of war. But I am still in the camp of anti-war. However, all of us are now in the same camp—that of the unemployed. Your campaign to release the political prisoners gives fine expression to my anti-war ideas.”



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