Sri Lanka: SEP and ISSE hold meeting on political prisoners

Our correspondents
23 December 2011

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) held a public meeting in Colombo on December 8 as part of their campaign for the release of all political prisoners held by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

SEP and ISSE members and supporters had campaigned among workers, students and housewives in and around Colombo to build the meeting. They distributed thousands of copies of the SEP statement, "SEP launches campaign to release Sri Lankan political prisoners," in both Sinhala and Tamil.

Chairing the meeting, W.A. Sunil, an SEP political committee member, said successive governments had unleashed grave attacks on the democratic rights of working people with the aid of the huge military machine developed during almost 30 years of civil war. The ruling elite had utilised the war to divide the working class and youth in the south from their counterparts in the north along communal lines.

"By contrast, the SEP's fight for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners, most of whom are northern Tamil youth, is bound up with the struggle to defend the democratic rights of workers and youth in the south," Sunil said. Even though the emergency regulations used to suppress the rights of workers and youth had officially been lifted, similar draconian provisions had been incorporated into the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

Sunil drew attention to the role of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Democratic Peoples Front (DPF), political parties claiming to represent Tamils. He explained that they were seeking to "preserve their own privileges in a rapprochement with the Colombo political establishment" and appealing to Washington and other major powers to put pressure on the government for a political settlement with the Tamil elite.

These same powers had supported the government's war, Sunil emphasised. They had no interest in the democratic rights of Tamil people but were striving to advance their interests in Asia. The TNA engaged in rhetoric about detainees in order to deflect anger among Tamils but avoided any consistent campaign for the release of the political prisoners. Such a campaign would harm the relations the TNA sought to build with the government, he added.

The next speaker, Kapila Fernando, the ISSE convener in Sri Lanka, said the Rajapakse government was utterly incapable of resolving any of the pressing needs of Sinhala and Tamil youth. It had recruited youth for war by exploiting the unemployment that it and its predecessors created.

Referring to a recent split in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), Fernando warned against illusions in the JVP dissidents. "The JVP vigorously supported the communal war against the Tamil minority. Now this dissident group tries to rally Tamil youth around its bankrupt nationalist program, half-heartedly criticising the government. They make futile demands for the government to release these prisoners but oppose mobilising the working class to defend democratic rights."

The main speaker, SEP General Secretary Wije Dias,

© World Socialist Web Site

a member of the WSWS international editorial board, said the democratic rights of the working people were under attack in every country. “As the crisis of global capitalism drives the ruling classes to impose drastic austerity measures, withdrawing all the social benefits won through decades of class battles, democratic rights become a luxury that cannot be tolerated by the capitalist elite, whether in a developed or underdeveloped country.

“The Rajapakse government continues to strengthen police-state measures that were put in place to carry out the 30-year barbaric civil war,” Dias said. The government had locked up more than 11,000 Tamil youth, “on suspicion” without any specific charges, soon after the last phase of the war in May 2009. “This was intended as an open threat to the workers and the rural poor whom the government knew would resist its attacks on their social conditions.”

Every protest action by workers, students and rural people had been met with police and military offensives, using batons, tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets, Dias explained. The repressive state machinery was well oiled and maintained to protect the profit system against the working people and the oppressed.

“Whatever changes are made in cabinet reshuffles or even governments, these bodies of armed men, prisons and courts exist to protect capitalist interests against the masses. This lesson was brought home by the experiences in Tunisia and Egypt. Until and unless the bourgeois state machine is replaced by Soviet-type organisations democratically elected by the working people, youth and rural poor, the aspirations of the masses cannot be addressed.

“Our campaign for the release of the political prisoners is not another protest action but is aimed at educating the masses on the role of the capitalist state and the necessary overall political understanding and preparation to replace it,” Dias emphasised.

The speaker drew lessons from the past struggles waged by the Trotskyist movement for the release of political prisoners, from the 1930s onward. He explained how a courageous campaign by the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the forerunner of the SEP, became a demand of the general strike that brought down the government of Sirima Bandaranaike in late 1976. Her government had jailed hundreds of JVP members and leaders after their abortive uprising in 1971. The RCL had conducted a principled campaign for the release of the political prisoners, including the JVP prisoners, even though the JVP had issued open death threats against RCL members.

In the same way today, Dias said, the SEP demanded the release of all political prisoners, as victims of oppressive capitalist rule, without making any concessions to their political views. “Through this campaign we aim at building a revolutionary working class movement and rally the youth and the rural poor around such a movement for the overthrow of the capitalist state and its replacement by a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to an international socialist program.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site