

Sri Lankan SEP condemns government attack on the party's rights

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka held a public meeting last Monday at Colombo's Public Library Auditorium against the banning of a meeting and the intimidation of SEP members in Jaffna. Despite transport difficulties, due to a private bus strike over fuel price increases, the meeting was well-attended.

The Ministry of Defence had forced the management of Jaffna's Weerasingham Hall to deny the venue to the SEP for a January 29 public meeting. The meeting was part of the party's campaign demanding the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners. Three days earlier, army intelligence personnel had detained and questioned SEP members Muthulingam Murugananthan and Rasendiran Sudarshan, and then organised a physical attack on them.

The military is continuing to gather information on SEP members in Jaffna, indicating that preparations are being made for a witchhunt against the party.

Before the meeting, SEP and ISSE supporters held campaigns at workplaces, universities and working class neighbourhoods warning of the political agenda behind President Mahinda Rajapakse government's attack. The SEP statements distributed in the campaigns included an Open Letter to the president, who is also the defence minister, denouncing the government's attack and exposing the reasons for it (See: "Sri Lanka: SEP open letter to the defence minister").

Chairing the meeting, K. Ratnayake, an SEP political committee member, said the actions against the SEP were completely illegal. Nearly three years after the end of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Rajapakse government was maintaining de facto military rule in the north.

Ratnayake said the government had started to unleash austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the backs of workers and the poor. "The Rajapakse government and sections of the ruling elite are nervous about the SEP developing a joint struggle of Tamil and Sinhala workers against the government," he explained.

The speaker highlighted the international character of the economic and political turmoil. He quoted from the latest *Sunday Times* editorial reminding the government: "People's movements have become fashionable all over the world since the 'Arab Spring' of last year. Not only have they brought down dictators from their pedestals in the Arab world, even in Europe and the United States of America, people have taken to the streets to protest the evils of capitalism."

The editorial had warned: "These winds of change that are sweeping in and around South Asia form a powerful message from the people that their sovereignty cannot be limited to periodic elections ..."

Ratnayake emphasised: "Fearful about the developing situation, the government is resorting to violent police-state methods of rule. Democratic rights can be defended only as part of a fight for socialism on the basis of an international program."

The next speaker, ISSE convenor Kapila Fernando, said the attack on the SEP was not accidental. "The government and its henchmen are well aware that the SEP is the only party that can pose a viable political challenge to their policies." He rejected the defence ministry's attempt, in banning the Jaffna meeting, to identify the SEP with "separatism". Fernando said: "It is the government that works to divide the working class along Sinhala and Tamil communal lines, in order to maintain bourgeois rule."

The ISSE convenor referred to the government's deployment, that day, of the military in the country's north-west coastal area to attack fishermen's demonstrations against fuel price hikes. "The SEP's warning that the guns aimed at Tamil people in the North and the East during the communal war would be turned against the working class as a whole has been proved," he said.

M. Thevarajah, a member of the SEP political committee, told the meeting that the end of the war had not brought peace or liberation to the north or the south. Instead, attacks were continuing on the Tamil and Sinhala working people alike.

Thevarajah explained that the talk of "political solutions" and "power sharing" between the island's Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites, sponsored by global and regional powers like the US and India, provided a façade for the government's development of police-state conditions.

"Only a unified struggle by Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, rallying the oppressed masses, for a Sri Lanka-Eelam socialist republic, as part of socialism in the South Asia, will establish the democratic rights of Tamils as well as the working people as a whole," Thevarajah said.

SEP general secretary Wije Dias, a member of the International Editorial Board of *World Socialist Web Site*, delivered the final speech. He explained the political meaning of the ban imposed by the Rajapakse government and the military on the SEP meeting in Jaffna.

"Our meeting was part of the campaign for the unconditional release of all political prisoners. That is not a single issue protest. The SEP campaign is based on a political perspective of uniting Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim working people and youth for the replacement of the reactionary Rajapakse government with a workers' and peasants' government and a Sri Lanka-Eelam socialist republic."

Dias said the occupation army in the north was used to block the meeting because this socialist perspective cut right across the divisive communal policy of Rajapakse and the communal elites.

"Although Rajapakse completed the war against the Tamils in May 2009, he has not stopped the north and east being used as a testing ground for the establishment of a military-police state throughout the island. The unconstitutional military ban on the SEP meeting is a clear

step toward that end and must be strongly condemned by all those who cherish democratic rights."

The speaker referred to Rajapakse's recent statement at the 64th anniversary of the country's independence, in which he had invoked patriotism to foment communal tensions and war hysteria. Rajapakse had said the separatist Tamil diaspora was still active abroad and working with elements inside Sri Lanka to "destabilise the motherland." Dias explained that the government now routinely slapped the "separatist supporter" label on anyone protesting against its policies. The attempt to pin this label on the SEP to suppress its democratic rights to engage in political activities was the sharp edge of this ludicrous move.

Dias highlighted the position taken by the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI), the Trotskyist party of the Indian sub-continent at the time, against the 1948 independence. The BLPI had mobilised the working class and youth for a 50,000-strong rally in Colombo to denounce the fake independence, characterising it as only a refashioning of the colonial domination over the island.

"Now Rajapakse is faithfully implementing the IMF's dictates to slash the living conditions of the working people and the rural poor of all communities. It is his government that is destabilising the social conditions of the vast majority of the working people."

Pointing to the developing protests by working people, youth and farmers in various parts of the island, Dias commented: "They coincide with the wave of revolutionary struggles that has begun to emerge throughout the world since the beginning of last year. All these struggles have shed the light on the historical need to build the revolutionary parties internationally on the program of international socialism."

He concluded: "The SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International is the only force that fights to build the world party of socialism. We appeal to all those concerned with democratic and social rights to join and build this party."



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