

Sri Lankan defence ministry blocks SEP meeting

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In another clear attack on the democratic rights of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan Ministry of Defence has directed the Chilaw Urban Council (UC) to ban an SEP public meeting at the town's Shirley Corea Hall. Located on the island's northwestern coast, Chilaw has been the scene of ongoing protests by fishermen and their families over the government's fuel price rises. The SEP meeting, entitled "Socialist Policies for the Fishermen's Struggle," was scheduled for yesterday.

Chilaw UC officials claimed that the SEP could not use the hall because it had been allocated to the police that had been mobilised to suppress the fishermen's protests. This is the second time the defence ministry has intervened behind the scenes in recent weeks to block an SEP meeting.

Last month, the ministry forced the management of the Weerasingham Hall in Jaffna to deny the venue for a scheduled January 29 SEP meeting as part of the party's campaign to demand the immediate release of political prisoners. The military also instigated violence against SEP members in Jaffna. (See: "Hands off the SEP! Defend SEP members in Jaffna!" and "Sri Lanka: SEP open letter to the defence minister")

The Chilaw meeting was booked by SEP members a week ago but over the past few days the hall and its grounds were taken over by police officers. SEP members contacted UC officials to check whether the hall could still be used. After consulting with the

council chairman, the Chilaw official in charge of booking the hall assured SEP members that there was no problem because police were vacating the premises on Tuesday evening.

However, after pasting posters in the areas near the hall, SEP members yesterday received a telephone call from the same official, who said the hall was not available because "the defence ministry informed us they wanted the hall for the use of police." The official said the UC would consider giving the SEP a later date for the meeting. The UC is controlled by councillors from the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance.

The UC claim is false. The police, in fact, vacated the hall on Tuesday. The real reason the SEP was blocked from using the venue was in order to suppress its political intervention among fishermen and workers in the area. The party has won increasing attention and support for its policies during the past several days.

Fishermen's protests, particularly on the northwestern coast, erupted as soon as the government, in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictates, increased fuel prices by nearly 50 percent on February 11, drastically impacting the fishing industry. Since then, fishermen have held pickets, refused to go to sea and demanded that prices be reduced to previous levels.

On February 15, Special Task Force (STF) police fired live bullets at a protest of thousands of Chilaw-Wella fishermen killing Antony Warnakulasuriya on the spot, and injuring three others. Together with thousands of police, the government also deployed the army throughout the area to intimidate the community.

Local Catholic priests are actively engaged in preventing fishermen and their families from fighting for their demands.

Tens of thousands—fishermen, workers and other rural poor—attended Warnakulasuriya’s funeral, expressing their deep anger over the killing of a young colleague and the government’s latest round of austerity measures.

The SEP is the only party explaining what lies behind the government’s attack on poor fishermen. The austerity measures are in line with demands made by the IMF in exchange for the release of delayed loan instalments worth \$US800 million. These include the devaluation of the Sri Lankan rupee, which has triggered skyrocketing prices in all essentials, increased fuel prices, bus fares and electricity charges, and cuts in government spending.

While the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has agreed to implement the IMF measures, it is nervous about growing mass opposition to its policies. On February 18, Rajapakse told a meeting in the Colombo suburb of Kadawata that he would not allow anyone to bring down the government.

Specifically referring to protests and road blockades by fishermen, he declared: “Some sections are now saying that [people] should come onto the roads and expel the government appointed by the people. It is not so easy to expel the president.” Rajapakse has attempted to invoke reactionary patriotism, claiming that there was a foreign conspiracy to topple his rule.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president’s brother, has also tried to whip up chauvinism. Referring to the recent protests, he declared: “It is in vain if we go backward with such incidents. If the country goes back after defeating the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] with such dedication it is in vain. We can’t allow that.”

The fishermen’s protests, however, are just the tip of an iceberg. Discontent is simmering among workers throughout Sri Lanka. Several plantation unions called a token one-day strike on February 17. Notwithstanding

the limited character of this action, tens of thousands of workers participated in the strike. Public sector workers and nurses in Colombo, as well as small farmers in the Matale district, have protested and this week about 15,000 non-academic workers will strike over pay demands. These are just early indications of the sharp class battles to come.

Under these conditions it is no surprise that the SEP is now a target of the Rajapakse government and the state apparatus. The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Based on socialist internationalism, it is the only party that provides a viable perspective for the working class in alliance with the rural poor to challenge and defeat the government attacks.



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