Sri Lankan government refuses to release Tamil political prisoners

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Fourteen Sri Lankan Tamil political prisoners ended a hunger strike of nearly three weeks last Friday at Welikada prison in Colombo after Prison Reforms and Rehabilitation Minister D.M. Swaminathan claimed he would expedite their cases. The government, however, refused the hunger strikers' demand for the unconditional release of all Tamil political detainees.

The continued incarceration without trial of hundreds of Tamils not only exposes the ongoing repression and discrimination against the country's Tamil minority. It is part of an escalating attack on the democratic rights of all sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

On February 29, 75 detainees at the Welikada prison held a one-day hunger strike in support of the 14 Tamil hunger strikers. Relatives and supporters of the protesting Tamil prisoners also held pickets and sit-down demonstrations in Jaffna, Vavuniya and Mannar in the north of the island over the past two weeks. Last Friday, Jaffna University students demonstrated to demand the release of the Tamil detainees.

There are still over 160 Tamil political prisoners being held without trial in Sri Lankan jails. Some were arrested during the nearly 30-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Others were taken into custody after the military defeat of the LTTE in May 2009.

All are held under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, which allows the police to use so-called confessions to charge and detain people for more than 18 months. The police force and its intelligence wing are notorious for extracting false confessions by torture.

The latest hunger strike was the fourth such prison protest in the last six months. In October 2015, over 220 detainees in 14 jails began an indefinite hunger strike over their ongoing imprisonment. The protests ended after the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of the Tamil bourgeois parties, convinced the hunger strikers to end their action, claiming the government was ready to release them.

President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe have repeatedly insisted there are no political prisoners and that those in custody are being held on criminal charges. Defence Minister Ruwan Wijewardena reiterated this claim, telling the media last Wednesday that "legal action will be taken against those whose crimes are proved."

In the face of widespread popular opposition, the government in recent months has released over 60 detainees but under stringent bail conditions. It has also established several special courts to try some detainees.

The flimsy character of the cases against the Tamil prisoners was again exposed when a special high court in Vavuniya released Murugaiah Komahan and Ganesaratnam Santhadevan on February 29. Imprisoned for seven years, they were released 15 months after a previous high court hearing rejected police charges based on supposed confessions of the detainees.

As it did last October, the TNA pressured the latest group of hunger strikers to halt their protests. On February 28, TNA parliamentarians Sivasakthi Ananthan and Selvan Adikalanathan visited Anuradhapura jail to try to persuade two of the protesters to end their strike.

A week later in Colombo, the TNA leaders again appealed to the detainees to end their fast, promising to take action to release them. While the hungers strikers rejected the empty promises from the TNA leadership, they could see no way forward and reluctantly decided to abandon the protest.

The TNA, led by parliamentarian R. Sambandan, has close relations with the pro-US Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government. During last year's presidential election campaign, the TNA backed Sirisena. Like other political groups supporting Sirisena, the TNA highlighted the previous government's war crimes and attacks on

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democratic rights, insisting that a new president would release the Tamil prisoners.

The TNA acted in line with advice from the US and India, which wanted former President Mahinda Rajapakse ousted. Washington's efforts were aimed at scuttling Rajapakse's close relations with Beijing and lining up Sri Lanka as part of the US war preparations against China.

The TNA wants to cut a deal with Colombo for the administration of the North and East of Sri Lanka. In line with this strategy, it opposes any struggle that might destabilise the present administration and backs its attacks on the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality are holding a public meeting in Jaffna on March 20 to expose the pro-imperialist stance of the various Tamil nationalist parties and explain the socialist perspective needed to fight the growing danger of war.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke to the families of several Tamil political prisoners.

Nadesan Tharmarajah, who has been detained at Magazine prison since September 2013, was involved in the latest hunger strike. He has been arrested, detained and tortured three times since the end of the war in 2009. His wife Naagalojini, 37, and a mother of five, is living with a relative in a small house at Achchuveli in Jaffna.

Naagalojini said: "We were previously living in the refugee camp at Vavuniya. My husband was arrested by police and tortured at a military camp in September 2009. He was released but arrested again in November of the same year and detained for three years.

"We feel sad about the prisoners' fasting campaign. Our children are very worried about their father and don't like even to play with other children. Our eldest son is 20 years old. He has abandoned his studies and is now working as a day labourer.

"Many times we were starving because we didn't have a proper income. My husband lost his leg in a military shell attack as we were fleeing the fighting during the war. We visited the prison several months back and were only able to speak to him for a few minutes. We've not been able to see him since because we can't afford to travel to the prison.

"Every two weeks they take my husband to the court and then send him back to the jail. He hasn't committed any crime. The politicians claim that Sirisena's 'good governance' is better than Rajapakse's but if that's the case why they don't release the detainees?"

Ganeshan Darshan, 26, was arrested at Nawalapitiya in Sri Lanka's central hill district, his father's birthplace. He was detained by the Terrorist Investigation Department in 2009 and held at Anuradhapura jail. His mother Chithra Ganeshan said he had been involved in several hunger strikes and, although the government and TNA parliamentarians promised to secure the release of the Tamil detainees, nothing had happened.

"When my son and his fellow prisoner Mathiyarasan Sealskin started fasting on February 25, the TNA parliamentarians visited the prison asked them to stop the hunger strike. They promised to take action to produce them in court soon. They stopped fasting but since then we've been unable to contact the MPs.

"I'm sick because I'm always thinking about him. He was shot in his knee during the war and finds it difficult to walk. We can't afford the fees for lawyers and to visit the courts in the North. He has been jailed for six years but the government cannot produce any charge sheets against him because they have no evidence. My son is a talented artist and has won several prison competition awards. His life is being unnecessarily wasted in the prison."

Sri Lankan workers—Sinhala and Tamil alike—must take a warning from the ongoing frame-up and incarceration of Tamil political prisoners. These methods will be used against all sections of the working class and the poor as they oppose the government's attacks on social conditions and democratic rights.

The fight for the unconditional release of political prisoners and the ending of the military occupation of the North and East is part of the struggle to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers in defence of jobs, living standards and fundamental democratic rights. This is an integral part of the fight for Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam and socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

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