

Sri Lanka: Jaffna residents demand release of Maruti Suzuki workers

Our correspondents
22 April 2017

Workers and youth from Jaffna, in war-ravaged northern Sri Lanka, have endorsed the International Committee of the Fourth International's campaign to free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in India.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters are holding a protest picket and public meeting in Jaffna next week to demand release of the autoworkers. A campaign team recently discussed the issue with workers from the municipal council, Jaffna University and other workplaces.

The Maruti Suzuki workers were prosecuted on frame-up charges because they dared to fight against the brutal working conditions at the Japanese-owned company's Manesar plant in Haryana. Thirteen workers have been sentenced to life imprisonment and 18 others to three to five years' jail. The Indian police, judiciary and political establishment, including the previous Congress-led government and the current Bharatiya Janatha Party-led administration, collaborated in the witch-hunt.

Eight years after the end of the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Jaffna continues to be occupied by tens of thousands of Sri Lankan military personnel. Tamil people regularly hold protests to demand the military withdraw from the province, return land seized from its previous owners, release political prisoners and provide information about the people who "disappeared" during the war.

SEP and IYSSE members spoke with Jaffna municipal council workers about the political importance of the international campaign to release the Maruti-Suzuki workers.

"We too have the responsibility to defend the Maruti Suzuki workers," one worker said. "We are forced to

work for nine hours but are only paid for eight hours and there are many temporary workers who should be given permanent jobs. Despite the fact that there are vacancies, the northern provincial council does not fill these positions and provide permanent jobs."

Another worker said: "Developing such a fight is good and will help to defend democratic rights. We will participate in the picketing. We hadn't heard about this issue before and only learnt about it through you people."

Council worker M. Pathmanathan added: "Punishing these workers by these methods is unjust and therefore I support the campaign to free them."

A group of council drivers also commented. "We are shocked about the verdict," one said. "It's horrible that 13 workers have been imprisoned for life on false charges and it is unacceptable. There may be a situation in the future where a similar thing could happen to us."

A. Washington, a welder and Jaffna Municipal Council Workers Union leader, condemned the witch hunt against the Maruti-Suzuki workers and explained that Jaffna council workers still had a nine-hour working day.

"Our workers were also fighting for permanent jobs. There are discriminations. I'm a welder but am not paid a proper salary," he said. "We've fought over several problems here but there's been no solution. The local governments are controlled by the Tamil National Alliance [a coalition of Tamil bourgeois parties] but they don't care about workers' problems."

Kesavan, a university worker, denounced the prison terms imposed on the Indian autoworkers. "I demand the immediate and unconditional release of Maruti Suzuki workers, who have been illegally imprisoned by an Indian court," he said. "These judgments can be used against workers in Sri Lanka and other countries

too. I oppose this anti-democratic act. Jailing people who are fighting for their rights is tantamount to turning workers into slaves.”

Navaratnam, another university worker, asked why the Indian communist parties were not fighting these attacks. Campaigners explained the degeneration of these Stalinist organisations, their collaboration with capitalist parties, including the Congress, and their transformation into parties of the bourgeois establishment.

“We have to work for nine hours a day, even during holidays,” Navaratnam said. “They don’t allow us to question this injustice. I’ve been working here for 25 years. They held an examination for my promotion but there were many hard questions and I was unable to pass. It’s not only the Indian workers but Sri Lankan workers who are facing similar problems. I demand the release of those Maruti Suzuki workers.”

P. Suba, an aesthetics graduate, has been involved in an ongoing protest for jobs in Jaffna. “We must condemn the attack on the Maruti Suzuki workers and I’ll sign the petition today,” she said.

“I had to finish my education in 2011. Due to the war and floods we were displaced to several places and so I had to continue my studies for another year. I’ve been unemployed for more than five years. I had to spend more money for hostel [accommodation] and other needs during the university studies and so I’m unable to take care of my parents.

“During the war, we were moved out of the conflict zones by ships. We were moved from one place to another and on board ships for many days and faced a high risk of attack,” she said.

The SEP and IYSSE urge workers, youth and students to participate in the protest picket and public meeting in Jaffna on April 27.

Picketing: Outside the Jaffna bus stand at 3.30 p.m.–4.30 p.m.

Meeting venue and time: Veerasingham Hall, 5.00 p.m.–7.00 p.m.



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