

Sri Lanka: Jaffna picket demands release of framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a successful picket and public meeting on April 28 in Jaffna, the capital of Sri Lanka's war-torn northern province, to demand the immediate release of framed-up Maruti Suzuki autoworkers. Over 30 SEP and IYSSE supporters, including workers, youth, fishermen and housewives, participated in both events.

In March, a Haryana state court in northern India sentenced 13 Maruti Suzuki workers to life in prison after they were falsely convicted of killing a company manager. The prosecution failed to prove any connection between these workers and the manager's death.

Last Friday's picket and public meeting are part of a campaign by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) to expose the victimisation and legal frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers, exonerate them of all charges and win their release from prison.

The picket, held outside Jaffna's central bus station for almost an hour, attracted the support of workers, youth and other ordinary people. SEP and IYSSE members campaigned for several days before the picket, distributing thousands of Tamil- and Sinhala-language ICFI statements about the jailed workers.

Pickets displayed a banner and placards reading "Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers!" "Unite to defeat the witch-hunt against the Maruti Suzuki workers," "Forge the international unity of the working class" and "Fight for international socialism against imperialist war plans." *Uthayan*, a Jaffna-based Tamil-language newspaper, carried a brief report on the protest picket.

Mayuran, a young construction worker, told pickets: "I read your leaflet and came here to express my solidarity. The Maruti Suzuki workers have been

subjected to unjust punishments. Workers must unite and fight to win their release. I like socialism but the TNA [the Tamil National Alliance] and other Tamil groups are doing nothing for the people. They're only interested in their own privileges."

Last Friday's meeting was chaired by SEP member T. Sambandan. He said the campaign to release the Maruti Suzuki workers was a crucial issue for the international working class.

"The only crime committed by the Maruti Suzuki workers was to fight against the oppressive conditions inside their car factory," he said. Sri Lankan workers and students, he continued, faced similar state repression, including police attacks and the banning of demonstrations and strikes against the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's social austerity measures.

"The war victims of the north and east have also been continuously protesting to demand the release of Tamil political prisoners and for information about those 'disappeared' by the Sri Lankan military and police during Colombo's war against the separatist Tamil Tigers."

Sambandan explained that the Tamil bourgeois parties, such as the TNA, the Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) and the Tamil People Council (TPC), were oriented towards Indian government leaders and the imperialist powers, spreading illusions that the problems facing Sri Lankan Tamils can be solved by appealing to these forces. Tamil workers must instead forge an alliance with the workers in South Asia and internationally, he said.

SEP Political Committee member M. Devarajah told the meeting that the brutal punishment of the Maruti Suzuki workers was another indication that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government had

“declared class war against the Indian working class in order to attract foreign investment under his so-called ‘Making India’ program.”

Devarajah outlined the Sri Lankan government’s intensification of police-state methods against the working class. “After the petroleum corporation workers’ recent strike,” he said, “the government is moving to establish a special force under former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka, who led the communal war against the Tamil people. This is a warning to the Sri Lankan working class.”

SEP Political Committee member W.A Sunil delivered the concluding address. He emphasised that the campaign of the ICFI and the *World Socialist Web Site* was not oriented to appealing to the Indian government or the auto company owners.

“The aim of our campaign is to mobilise the industrial and political strength, and develop the unity, of the international working class, the only force which can win the Maruti Suzuki workers’ freedom.”

Sunil said the case against the Maruti Suzuki workers was—from the beginning right up to the imposition of life sentences—a joint conspiracy of the company owners, the police and the Haryana state government.

“This attack seeks to defend the interests of the Maruti Suzuki company and its multinational investors. It is part of the social counter-revolution being unleashed by the capitalist rulers against the working class in every country,” he said.

The speaker reviewed the treacherous role played by the two Indian Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India–Marxist (CPM)—and the All India Trade Union Confederation (AITUC).

“Over the last four years, these parties and the AITUC have isolated the Maruti Suzuki workers and given the Haryana government, the employers and the police, a free hand to advance their provocations and conspiracies against the autoworkers.”

Sunil explained the connection between the worsening global recession, the deepening economic crisis in India and the desperate efforts of all countries in the sub-continent to attract investment by attacking the living conditions and basic rights of the working class.

“The Modi government is determined to attack all the social and democratic rights of the Indian working class

and brutally suppress any opposition,” Sunil said. “The assault on the Maruti Suzuki workers shows that there is no limit to this brutality.”

The speaker said that while the Modi government was deepening its attacks on the working class, it was working as a frontline state for the US and its strategic interests in the region.

“The US has stepped up its military campaign against China as a part of its attempt to establish its hegemony in the region and all over the world,” Sunil said. The recent attacks on Syria and Afghanistan and US President Donald Trump’s war threats against North Korea were bringing the world to the brink of nuclear war.

“Without the international unity of the working class it cannot defeat the social counter-revolution at home or prevent the development of a third world war,” he said.

Sunil concluded his address by appealing for participants to support the ICFI’s campaign to release the Maruti Suzuki workers, to study the program and perspective of the SEP and the IYSSE, and to join their ranks.



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