

Sri Lankan university workers defeat union attempts to victimise SEP member

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A recent attempt by University Technical Officers Union (UTOU) officials to expel Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member M. Dehin Wasantha from the union has been exposed and defeated by union members at the University of Moratuwa.

UTOU branch secretary Wasantha Edirisooriya, with the support of the national vice-president Ruwan Premarathne, planned to send a secret letter to the union's central leadership demanding the SEP member's expulsion. The anti-democratic move, which came to light at an UTOU branch meeting at the university on August 11, was rejected by those in attendance.

Edirisooriya and Premarathne's letter was in response to Dehin distributing an article critical of the union leadership outside the university's main entrance. The article had been posted on the Sinhala-language section of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

A long-time member of the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, Dehin has a three-decade record of fighting for the rights of workers, students and the poor on the basis of socialist internationalism.

Dehin told the union meeting that the attempt to expel him was a witch-hunt and aimed at silencing all opposition to the union leaders' treacherous collaboration with the administration.

One UTOU official claimed that there was a clause in the union constitution banning members from being involved in politics. This was rejected by a union member who said that, although there was such a clause in the union constitution, being involved in politics was the democratic right of all Sri Lankan citizens.

Another member told the meeting said: "Even when we were in the leadership Dehin spoke against us but we didn't try to expel him from the union. He has a

right to speak about his ideas."

After branch members said Edirisooriya had no right to send a letter without their approval, the UTOU branch secretary attempted to defend himself, claiming that he sent the letter in a "personal capacity." This was rejected by the meeting.

The UTOU leadership, like the rest of the Sri Lankan union bureaucracy, has attempted to derail the militant demands of university non-academic workers who have come forward to fight growing attacks by successive governments and university administrations. The union has consistently tried to limit workers' action, promoting illusions that they can pressure the government to change course.

The WSWs article distributed by Dehin was entitled "University employees and neighbors are blamed for the death of a student succumbing to dengue!" It exposed false and slanderous attempts to hold university workers and nearby residents responsible for the death of a female Moratuwa University student.

The article explained that her death, and the dengue fever epidemic sweeping the country, was a direct result of successive government budget cuts to public health. Sri Lanka is currently facing an unprecedented outbreak of the deadly disease with 296 deaths and over 103,000 cases reported in 2017 alone. About 80 students at Moratuwa University have contracted the disease so far this year.

The WSWs also revealed that UTOU branch secretary Edirisooriya had collaborated with the university administration to accuse technical officers of creating breeding grounds for the mosquitoes that carry dengue at the institution. Edirisooriya backed legal action taken by the administration against the university employees. Two technical officers, one supervisor and a worker employed on a contract basis, were fined as a

result of these claims.

The article not only angered Edirisooriya but the university administration which summoned Dehin, accusing him of “defaming the university” and “advised” him not to do such things in future. Firmly standing on his principles, Dehin rejected the allegations, defended the content of the article and his democratic right to distribute it.

The exposure and defeat of the union witch-hunt against SEP member Dehin is an important indication that rank-and-file UTOU members recognise him as a principled opponent of the attacks by the government, university administration and union bureaucracy on their working and living conditions.

Confronted with determined opposition by rank and file members of the union, UTOU branch secretary Edirisooriya was forced to withdraw his letter. The union leadership spent the rest of the August 11 meeting discussing the forthcoming annual union conference at St. Thomas College, Guruthalawa, 200 km from Colombo.

Discussion on the entertainment at the event was interrupted when Dehin asked why attendance machines were being installed outside each department at the university. When these machines were introduced four year ago they were initially placed only at the university entrance. New machines outside each department now means it will take some employees about 20 minutes to reach the machine, or about 40 extra minutes each day recording their attendance.

The university workers opposed the attendance machines when they were first introduced, recognising them as an attempt to discipline them and drive up productivity. The unions collaborated with administration to ensure that the installation went ahead.

At the August 11 branch meeting, UTOU branch secretary Edirisooriya claimed that the new attendance machines had already been ordered and their installation could not be stopped because it would lead to audit inquiries. In an attempt to defuse opposition, the union leadership passed a resolution calling for the networking of all the machines. Moratuwa University employees, however, have been already compelled to work an additional 15 minutes per day.

The combined attempts of the UTOU bureaucracy and Moratuwa University administration to intimidate

and victimise Dehin is connected to the government’s restructuring of education and is aimed at silencing all opposition to its austerity policies. In line with International Monetary Funds demands for spending cuts, privatisation and increased productivity, the Sirisena-Wickremasinghe government is installing attendance machines at every government office.



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