

Sri Lankan workers and students defend Julian Assange

Our correspondents
7 June 2018

The Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka are winning support from workers, students, artists and academics for the International Committee of the Fourth International's campaign to defend Julian Assange.

The Sri Lankan Trotskyists have organised a rally on 19 June outside the Fort Railway Station in Central Colombo to demand freedom for the WikiLeaks editor. A rally has also been organised in the Indian city of Sriperumbudur, near Chennai. (Click here for details)

We publish below interviews and statements from Jayawardenapura University students, Katunayake free trade zone employees and other workers in Sri Lanka.

Sasanka, a fourth-year sociology student, said: "I strongly support the SEP's campaign demanding freedom for Julian Assange. The reason US imperialism wants to capture people like Assange is because it fears that any exposure of its war crimes will radicalise masses of people.

"Assange is being victimised in order to intimidate others who may come forward to reveal the anti-democratic programs of capitalist governments. The Sri Lankan government is also taking censorship measures against social media and so this campaign is very relevant to people in Sri Lanka."

Heshan, a third-year science student, said: "I oppose war and stand for world peace. War destroys our right to live. US imperialism is heading toward another world war and it doesn't want the truth of this to be revealed. No country should be allowed to violate our right to freedom of speech. I welcome this campaign to free Assange and the development of a socialist movement to put an end to capitalism and its destructive agenda."

Tharindu, a final year student, said the persecution of Assange was part "an attack on freedom of the media." He pointed to the "disappearance" of several Sri Lankan journalists who had criticised the government. "Not a single journalist who has disappeared in recent years has been found," Tharindu said.

"These attacks are connected to the global crisis of capitalism. Their purpose is to terrify and silence those journalists who fight to protect democratic rights. Assange is being persecuted because he has revealed some of the crimes of imperialism. The campaign to protect Assange must be widely supported by Sri Lankan student unions and youth organisations."

Hasitha, a sociology student, decided to speak with SEP campaigners after seeing one of their "Demand freedom of Julian Assange" placards.

"I know Assange is an Australian journalist and the founder of WikiLeaks," she said, "but I didn't realise that he has been virtually imprisoned in Ecuador's embassy in London. And I didn't know that he has been barred from any contact with the outside world. I oppose these anti-democratic actions."

SEP campaigners spoke with workers from the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ), located north of Colombo, near Sri Lanka's main international airport. About 40,000 workers, mostly women from rural areas, are employed at the cheap-labour export processing facility.

Wasantha, a garment worker, originally from Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka's central north, declared: "I say that Assange should be released. It is clear that this is not just an attack on him.

"It's also important for workers everywhere to fight against the danger of a world war because the destruction from such a conflict would be immense. It

is therefore necessary to disclose as much information as possible about government preparations for war.”

Wasantha said he worked from 7.30 a.m. until 8.30 p.m. and had little time to think about anything else. His monthly salary was only 35,000 rupees (\$US220) and 150 rupees per hour for overtime work, which made it difficult to survive. The 2,500-rupee monthly attendance allowance was not paid, he said, if an employee missed just two days’ work.

“It’s only by talking to you that I’ve been able to learn about international politics. I read your pamphlet *Socialism and the Fight Against War* and need to discuss this more.”

Mahesh, another FTZ worker, commented on the danger of a world war and called for freedom for Assange.

“I am against war,” he said. “The US had been waging war for years and has caused immense destruction in the Middle East. A world war is possible.”

Koushalya, a shoe factory worker from Meethotamulla, the site of an April 2017 garbage dump disaster that killed over 30 people, said: “Politicians are openly engaged in corruption and crimes. Exposing them should not be illegal.

“Anyone who exposes this corruption is standing up for the rights of the people. The method of those in power is to hunt down and kill such whistleblowers.”

Koushalya said the garbage dump collapse had shattered any faith residents had in the government, the ruling establishment and the media. Only the SEP and the WSWS had intervened to explain the central political issues.

“This shows the importance of forthright journalists who will stand up to the crimes of the government, like Julian Assange has done. Assange must be released. We stand in solidarity with him.”

Amila, a young accountant, said: “I was greatly concerned several years ago when Julian Assange lost his basic human rights and had to seek refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. Now he is being threatened with losing that right to protection as well.

“Assange is already a political prisoner precisely because he spoke the truth against power. Cutting off his human rights is an attempt by the US to cover the truth about its various crimes.”

Induni, a construction industry engineer, said:

“Julian Assange is a brave journalist who has provided information related to US war crimes. His actions are very similar to the release of the Pentagon Papers. We, like all other workers, should be with him, in solidarity.”

She opposed Ecuador’s decision to isolate Assange and prevent him receiving visitors or accessing the Internet. “This as an instance of the capitalist system trying to prevent the working class and ordinary people from accessing honest information... I fully endorse the ICFI campaign to free Assange and the June 17 rally in Sydney.”

Jeewithan, a media worker from Colombo, condemned the anti-democratic campaign against Assange. In attacking honest and genuine journalists, the US is attempting to cover up its conspiracies and crimes, he said. “The US is waging war in the Middle East for resources and it will incarcerate or kill individuals who tell this truth. We have to determinedly oppose that.”

Jeewithan, a member of Sri Lanka’s Tamil minority, said the government carried out similar attacks against the media during the country’s civil war. “International reporters were blocked from going to the war zone and reporting the truth,” he said. “Local media people who dared to point out the truth were threatened, abducted and some were killed. These things have not stopped with the change of government.”



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