

Pickets in Sri Lanka and India demand freedom for Julian Assange

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful picket in Colombo yesterday afternoon to demand Julian Assange's freedom. In India, supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) organised a demonstration at Sriperumbudur, 40 kilometres from Chennai, in the state of Tamil Nadu. Both events were live streamed via Facebook.

Nearly 60 SEP and IYSSE members and supporters participated in the protest held in front of Colombo Fort railway station. A substantial Tamil-speaking delegation from the war-ravaged Jaffna peninsula and also plantation workers from central Sri Lanka took part.

The SEP/IYSSE picket lasted about an hour and attracted considerable interest from workers and youth returning from work and studies. Before and during the picketing, SEP/IYSSE campaigners distributed copies of the ICFI and the WSWs International Editorial Board statement titled "For international action to defend Julian Assange!" in Sinhala and Tamil.

Pickers displayed a banner reading "Free Julian Assange" in English, Sinhala and Tamil and also carried placards, which included: "Build an International Coalition to fight internet censorship," "Build an anti-war world movement based on international socialism," "Build international unity of the working class" and "Fight for a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia."

An attempt by plainclothes policemen to video record the participants was prevented by SEP organisers, who insisted on the party's democratic rights and opposed the police spying operation.

The Tamil daily *Virakesari*, UK-based Tamil channel Athavan TV and privately-owned Siyatha TV sent

journalists to the picket and recorded comments from SEP assistant secretary Deepal Jayasekera and SEP political committee member M. Thevarajah, in Sinhala and Tamil respectively.

At the conclusion, K. Ratnayake, a member of the SEP political committee, addressed the gathering in Sinhala and his remarks were translated into Tamil. He warmly welcomed all participants, explaining that the picket was part of an international ICFI campaign to defend Assange.

Explaining the significance of the fight to free Assange, Ratnayake said that it "is inseparably bound with the struggle for the defence of democratic rights and against the repression of basic rights of the working class and oppressed in every country by imperialist rulers and their pro-imperialist backers."

Ratnayake pointed out that Assange had been subjected to a witch-hunt by the imperialist powers because his website, WikiLeaks, has exposed war crimes carried out by the US and its allies in the Middle East, Afghanistan and other countries.

The speaker highlighted the importance of the exposure of imperialist war crimes, noting that the socialist government that came to power after the Russian Revolution in 1917 published the secret documents of the Czarist government, revealing the intrigues and conspiracies of imperialist powers.

Ratnayake explained that the attack on WikiLeaks and Assange was part of a broader crackdown on democratic rights in the US and other countries, aimed at controlling what people read and listen to by censoring the Internet, including social media.

"This attack on democratic rights is underway to repress those who rise up against capitalism and imperialism. Not only in imperialist countries, but in countries like Sri Lanka and India, ordinary people face

this situation. The rulers of these countries have not raised even a word against the witch-hunt against Assange. Instead, they are getting ready to act against the masses and are being encouraged by actions of their imperialist masters,” he said.

Ratanayake said journalists were subjected to brutal repression, including assassinations and abductions, during the 30-year civil conflict in Sri Lanka. He warned that the current Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government was going to intensify its attacks on basic democratic rights, pointing out that it had foreshadowed a ban on social media in line with other countries.

“Their [the government’s] aim is to block the growing struggles of workers, youth and the oppressed from developing into a socialist movement that challenges their class rule and to establish a dictatorial regime,” he said.

Ratnayake explained that in contrast to the initiative taken by the ICFI and its sections in defence of Assange, the pseudo-lefts in Sri Lanka—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—and the media had maintained a complete silence about the dangers faced by the WikiLeaks editor.

“The ICFI and its sections, including the SEP in Sri Lanka, are utterly different from these outfits,” he said. “We are an international organisation representing the interests of the international working class and fighting for international socialism. Therefore for us, the campaign to free Assange is a part of that fight... We declare that this struggle will not stop here. It is an ongoing campaign.”

Ratnayake concluded by appealing to all participants to help the SEP to deepen and widen the campaign.

In India, ICFI supporters picketed at the main bus terminal in Sriperumbudur, winning the attention of hundreds of workers leaving factories owned by major global auto and electronic industries. The ICFI campaigners had put up posters announcing the picket and campaigned among workers in the area, distributing leaflets explaining the necessity to defend Assange.

The banner at the picket in English, Tamil and Hindi declared: “Free Julian Assange.” Slogans in English and Tamil demanded freedom for Assange, said WikiLeaks and Assange had exposed US war crimes

and intrigues and said the only “crime” for which Assange is being witch-hunted is telling the truth to the world’s people.

ICFI supporters Arun Kumar and Sathish Simon addressed the gathering in Tamil and English respectively.

“The corporate media and pseudo-left in India have not reported on the situation confronting the WikiLeaks editor in recent years, especially since Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) came to power in 2014 and strengthened New Delhi’s relationship with Washington,” they stated. “As a result, many people are unaware of the dangers facing Assange, and have learnt about it only from the Indian Trotskyists.”

The speakers said major powers, including the US, and pro-imperialist governments like India’s Modi regime, are moving to block the free and democratic flow of information through the Internet and social media.

In March last year, they emphasised, 13 militant workers from the Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant in Manesar in northern India were sentenced to life in prison on frame-up murder charges as part of a company-government joint witch-hunt. Recently police killed 13 villagers in Tuticorin in southern India who were protesting against environment pollution by a copper smelter.

“What is becoming more and more clear is that the struggle for freedom of speech, and a host of social rights—including the right to clean drinking water free of toxic chemicals, and a healthy environment, the right to a decent permanent job, the right to free education and medical care—requires the mobilisation of the vast social power of the international working class,” the speakers said. “The only viable alternative perspective for these struggles is an anti-imperialist, anti-war and socialist perspective.”



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