

Significant response to Sri Lankan meeting demanding release of jailed poet Ahnaf Jazeem

Our correspondents
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Last Sunday's online meeting demanding the release of Sri Lankan poet Ahnaf Jazeem attracted a significant audience. The meeting was organised by the Action Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Art and Expression (ACDAE), held via Zoom and live-streamed on Facebook.

Over 80 people attended the live event and the video, which was posted on the ACDAE's Facebook page, has now been watched by about 1,000 more. The ACDAE was established in August 2019, under the political initiative and guidance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka.

Ahnaf Jazeem, a 26-year-old poet from Sri Lanka's Muslim minority, has been arbitrarily detained for more than a year without any formal charges under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The Terrorism and Investigation Division (TID) has falsely accused him of "teaching racism and extremism to students and publishing books on it."

ACDAE assistant secretary Lohan Gunaweera chaired the meeting, briefly describing the struggle being waged by the committee to secure Jazeem's release. He stressed that the poet's freedom could not be won by appealing to governments, which are attacking democratic rights, but by independently mobilising the working class. "The meeting will discuss a broader political program of international socialism," on which that struggle is based, he said.

Later in the meeting, Gunaweera read a message from Afham Jazeem, the young poet's brother, who said he would join the ACDAE to discuss "how to fight such arbitrary arrests and human rights violations," and invited all those who value democratic rights to participate in the discussion.

ACDAE chairman and SEP political committee member

Sanjaya Jayasekara, delivered the main report, detailing how the police had fabricated false charges and then arbitrarily imprisoned Jazeem.

"The Rajapakse government is deliberately promoting communalism and carrying out anti-democratic attacks as it confronts rising working-class struggles against its big-business policies," Jayasekara said.

"The terror attack on Easter Sunday in 2019, which occurred under the previous government, has been exploited by [President Gotabaya] Rajapakse to intensify these attacks under the pretext of strengthening 'national security' and to whip up anti-Muslim chauvinism."

The speaker said that in order to defeat the frame up and win basic democratic and social rights, workers must break from unions, which have become direct tools of the government and the companies, form their own rank-and-file committees and fight on a socialist perspective. He said the ACDAE would conduct its work as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) put forward by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Kapila Fernando, an SEP Political Committee member and leader of the Teacher-Student-Parent Rank-and-File Safety Committee (TSPRFSC), told the meeting that TSPRFSC fully endorsed the fight to release Jazeem. He noted that the unity of teachers across Sri Lanka against all communalist divisions and in defence of their jobs and conditions, was challenging the government's anti-Muslim and anti-Tamil campaign.

Next to address the meeting was Thomas Scripps, assistant national secretary of the British SEP, who is playing a key role in the ICFI's struggle for the release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

Scripps said that the campaign waged by the ACDAE to defend Ahnaf Jazeem was extremely important, "not only

for the defence of democratic rights, but also for the politically essential task of unifying the working class in the struggle against the Rajapakse government.”

The speaker thanked the Sri Lankan SEP for its powerful campaign for the release of Julian Assange. He pointed out that Assange and WikiLeaks have carried out “the most significant journalistic exposures of the 21st century, including of imperialist war crimes, torture, coup plots, state surveillance and corruption.” This is why Assange has been “subjected to a decade of unrelenting persecution.”

Assange’s persecutors, Scripps continued, “are making an example of Assange and using his case to establish dictatorial precedents, allowing governments to decide what does and does not constitute journalism and to punish those who transgress as enemy agents.”

The speaker said the ruling elites internationally, the corporate media and pseudo-left parties were doing everything possible to block Assange’s freedom.

The official campaign for Assange’s release, Scripps explained, involves demoralised moral appeals to “his persecutors, his former slanderers in the media and those self-proclaimed ‘lefts’ like former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn who maintained a guilty silence on Assange’s imprisonment for years.”

Scripps said that the SEP has consistently insisted that the fight for Assange’s freedom requires the mobilisation of the international working class. “Its fate and Assange’s are tightly bound together in the fight for democratic rights and against war.”

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah spoke on behalf of the Plantation Workers’ Action Committees. He said the fight for the unconditional reinstatement of 24 victimised Alton Estate workers in Maskeliya is similarly bound up with the independent struggle of the working class for democratic rights as a whole. The Alton Estate workers have been dismissed from their jobs, followed by frame-up charges from the company and the police, assisted by the plantation trade unions and the Ceylon Workers Congress in particular.

Dhammika Senanayake addressed the meeting on behalf of the Health Workers’ Action Committee. He said that health workers currently involved in struggles across Sri Lanka had to recognise that the problems they face, as well as the attacks on democratic rights, flow from the same root, the crisis of capitalism.

“It is essential for workers to realise that the communalist divisions provoked by the ruling class must be defeated in order to advance a strong working-class

movement to challenge capitalism,” Senanayake.

The concluding remarks to the meeting were delivered by ACDAE secretary and SEP Political Committee member Prageeth Aravinda. The main focus of his speech was to refute assertions by the pseudo-left that it was difficult to rally support for Ahnaf Jazeem, who is a Muslim, because of racist sentiments in society. These claims were made by Pubudu Jayagoda, a leader of the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), during an online meeting on Ahnaf Jazeem last month.

Aravinda told the meeting that these sorts of reactionary arguments made by the pseudo-left cover up the fact that communal provocations have been deliberately used by the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie throughout the whole history of its rule. These methods were in order to divide and weaken the working class, whenever the capitalist crisis intensified.

The speaker explained that it was crucial to expose the anti-working-class character of the pseudo-left in order to unite the working class and defend democratic rights. “The pseudo-left internationally bases its politics on identities, such as race, colour and gender, and denies the historical revolutionary role of the working class.”

During the discussion session, ACDAE Chairman Jayasekara answered a question from a participant about “whether it would not be effective to organise a picket to defend the poet in addition to online discussions.”

Jayasekara insisted that whatever campaigns were held, the most crucial issue was the perspective on which they were based. The understanding of all who fight for democratic rights should be that they cannot be won without mobilising the industrial and political power of the working class, he said.



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