

Sri Lankan and Indian ruling elites whip up national rivalry between poverty-stricken fishing communities

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On December 18, 19 and 20, the Sri Lankan Navy (SLN) arrested 68 Indian fishermen and impounded their vessels for allegedly fishing in Sri Lankan waters. The arrests were part of intensified navy patrols in recent months.

Capitalist politicians on both sides of the Palk Strait, the narrow passage between southern India and northern Sri Lanka, are now denouncing fishermen from each other's countries in an attempt to divert outward the rising social tensions produced by increased living costs and "herd immunity" pandemic policies.

The reciprocal arrest of Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen has been a major issue for the poor fishing communities in both countries in recent decades. This year the SLN is reported to have arrested Indian fishermen on 19 different occasions and killed five Indian fishermen.

The Palk Strait was a traditional fishing ground for Sri Lankan and Indian fishermen during the British colonial rule until 1947, with the sharing of its sea resources continuing after independence and up until the 1980s. These long-standing arrangements were disrupted by the anti-Tamil racist war launched by Sri Lanka's United National Party government in 1983 and continued by successive Colombo governments.

The ongoing military harassment of Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen, which underscores the reactionary and irrational character of arbitrary national borders maintained by ruling classes in both countries, is aimed at whipping up chauvinist sentiment and dividing the working class.

As the Sri Lankan Navy website reports:

- On December 18, the navy arrested six Indian fishing trawlers and 43 fishermen, southeast of Delft Island, off the Jaffna Peninsula.

- On December 19, the navy arrested two fishing trawlers and 12 fishermen, south of Mannar.

- On December 20, the navy arrested another two trawlers and 13 Indian fishermen, west of Analativu Island.

The Indian media reports that the fishermen were from Rameswaram, Thangachimadam, Mayiladuthurai and Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu and that the arrests provoked angry responses in these communities.

According to *ANI News*, fishermen from Thangachimadam and Rameswaram began a protest hunger strike on December 22 to demand the Indian government intervene and secure the immediate release of the arrested fishermen and their trawlers.

The *Economic Times* reported that members of some Tamil Nadu fishermen's associations took indefinite strike action on December 19 and plan to block the railroads on January 1 if the fishermen and the boats are not released. Sri Lankan authorities have never returned impounded vessels.

In a letter to the Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin declared: "The alarming frequency at which these incidents of apprehension and attacks are happening warrants urgent attention. The lives and livelihoods of our fishermen must be protected when they fish in the traditional waters of Palk Bay."

Stalin's concern for Tamil Nadu fishermen is bogus. His Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party and the rival All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have ruled Tamil Nadu for more than half a century. Under their state governments, the fishing industry has become one of India's most profitable sectors, even as fishermen live in dire poverty. In Tamil Nadu, around 91 percent of the state's 200,000 fishing families subsist below the poverty

line.

At the end of the 1980s, India modernised its fisheries by encouraging private investments under its so-called “Blue Revolution,” which transformed former small-scale boat owners into fishing workers. The Indian ruling elite, having proletarianised these fishermen and driven them into deeper poverty, is now cynically posturing as their defenders while pushing them against their Sri Lankan fishing industry brothers and sisters.

Justifying the recent arrests, the SLN declared: “Taking into account the impact of foreign fishermen poaching in Sri Lankan waters on the livelihood of local fishing communities and the sustainability of fishery resources of Sri Lanka, the Navy is conducting regular patrols to curb illegal fishing activities in island waters.”

The SLN’s claim to be protecting the local fishing community is as hypocritical as the posturing of Tamil Nadu bourgeois politicians about “their” fishermen.

In fact, the livelihood of the Sri Lankan northern fishing community, which is still using outdated fishing techniques due to the lack of capital, is in danger of being swallowed up by big businesses penetrating the sector. Fishermen in the Northern province have already lost traditional fishing areas to foreign fishing ships and through the construction of sea cucumber farms, that have all been facilitated by Colombo.

Sri Lankan fishermen also face constant harassment by the SLN under the pretext of fighting “smuggling” and policing fishing regulations. Sri Lanka’s North and Eastern provinces remain under military occupation even though Colombo’s civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ended in May 2009.

Like their Indian counterparts, the Tamil bourgeois parties and the fishermen’s unions in Sri Lanka, agitate against Indian fishermen and demand harsher repressive measures.

On October 17, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) initiated a protest flotilla of fishing boats from Mullaitivu to Point Pedro to protest Colombo’s “lack of action” in stopping Indian fishermen supposedly poaching in the Sri Lankan waters. The flotilla was organised immediately after the SLN arrested 23 Indian fishermen.

On December 24, the Jaffna Fishermen’s Cooperative Union held a demonstration outside the Jaffna District Secretariat. The union backed the navy’s oppressive border controls, with protesters chanting, “Arrest the Indian fishermen,” “Don’t release the arrested vessels” and “Don’t release the arrested fishermen as an act of

good faith.”

After the event, Fisheries Minister Douglas Devananda met with the protesters, promising harsh measures against the Indian fishermen. Tamil National People’s Front (TNPF) leader Gajendra Kumar Ponnambalam participated in the demonstration.

In July, Ponnambalam told parliament that: “Indian fishermen have been encroaching into Sri Lankan waters. These are fishermen who come in large trawlers and they have literally destroyed the fishing assets of the fishermen of the Northern Province, particularly from Mannar to Jaffna and Mullaitivu.”

The class character of Sri Lanka’s Tamil bourgeois parties’ position is reflected in their efforts to establish joint relations with foreign capital to exploit the cheap labour in the country’s North and Eastern provinces.

In July–August this year, thousands of Tamil Nadu fishermen demonstrated against a proposed Indian Fisheries Bill which would place small-boat owners and mechanised vessels in the same category, thus imposing unbearable conditions on small-scale fishermen.

In Sri Lanka, small-scale fishermen, particularly in the Northern Province, have protested big-business sea cucumber farms.

The struggle of Indian and Sri Lankan fishermen is occurring amid rising working-class strikes and protests against austerity measures in both countries and around the world as governments attempt to impose the full burden of economic crisis on the working masses.

On January 8 and November 26 in 2020 Indian workers walked out in general strike action against the Modi government’s austerity measures. Likewise, Sri Lanka has seen a rising tide of working-class struggles in the past twelve months.

The furious denunciation of Sri Lankan and Tamil Nadu fishermen by capitalist politicians on both sides of the Palk Strait is driven by ruling elite fears that these struggles of the working class and the oppressed masses will take a unified form across the whole subcontinent.



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