

Release students detained under Sri Lanka's anti-terror laws!

Statement of the IYSSE and SEP (Sri Lanka)
22 August 2022

Yesterday, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is also defence minister, signed 90-day detention orders to incarcerate three leading student activists under the country's draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

Those detained are Inter-University Students Federation (IUSF) convener Wasantha Mudalige, Inter-University Bhikkhu Federation convener Galwawa Siridamma and Kelaniya University Student Union activist Hashan Gunatilake, all supporters of the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka, notwithstanding our fundamental and well-known political differences with the FSP, denounce Wickremesinghe's repressive actions and demand the immediate and unconditional release of the three student activists. We call on workers, youth and students to oppose these detentions and demand their immediate freedom.

Popular outrage has erupted across Sri Lanka and internationally following news on Sunday that the defence ministry had prepared and sent the detention orders to the president. Wickremesinghe's approval of the detentions makes clear that he is determined to crush all resistance by workers, youth and the poor to his regime's ongoing attacks on democratic and social rights.

Under the notorious PTA, which was enacted in 1979, the defence minister can detain anyone for 90 days without trial on "suspicion of terrorist activities." The defence minister can extend the detention for up to 180 days.

The PTA gives the police broad powers to arbitrarily arrest and detain anyone without charge. Sri Lankan police, who are notorious for using torture to extract confessions, are allowed to use these "confessions" as evidence in court. The PTA also allows the government to

ban any organisation it deems to be "terrorist" and confiscate its assets.

The PTA has been widely used to detain Tamils, particularly youth, on trumped-up charges since Colombo began its communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 1983. Dozens of these and other youth from across the country still languish in prisons, many without charges ever being filed against them.

The detention orders against Mudalige, Siridamma and Gunatilake were issued four days after they were arrested during a violent police attack on an IUSF-organised demonstration on August 18. About 2,000 students were involved in the protest, whose main demands were, "Ranil-Rajapakse junta must go. Stop repression," "Release the arrested Aragalaya [protest] activists," and "Build peoples' councils."

Police brutally dispersed the protest using water cannons and tear gas. Police assaulted demonstrators, chasing them for several kilometres, and arrested 19 on bogus allegations that their actions were "illegal" and "obstructing the police."

Sixteen of the arrested were released on harsh 500,000-rupee (\$US1,370) bail conditions on Saturday. Their cases will be heard on September 12. The other three were held in police detention, pending the issuing of the 90-day PTA detention orders.

The police have indicated that the detained student leaders will be investigated under fabricated accusations, including whether they engaged in "anti-state conspiracies" and had links to an "act of terrorism."

Police previously said the students would also be questioned about their involvement in the protests that began on April 9. These mass demonstrations of workers and the poor, which called for the resignation of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government, were fuelled by the disastrous shortages of essentials and

rampant inflation.

Along with the tens of thousands occupying the Galle Face Green in central Colombo, millions of workers participated in one-day general strikes on April 28 and May 6, eventually forcing Rajapakse to flee the country.

While the trade unions called these strikes, they opposed a full-scale mobilisation of the working class against the Rajapakse regime and the profit system—they diverted workers into making political demands for an interim capitalist government. This betrayal was backed by parliamentary opposition parties and the pseudo-left organisations such as Frontline Socialist Party.

The pro-US and widely-despised Wickremesinghe was appointed acting president after Rajapakse fled the country on July 14 and then was formally installed in this position by the discredited parliament on July 20.

On July 17, Wickremesinghe declared a “state of emergency,” and 24 hours after being officially sworn in as president unleashed a vicious military-police operation to evict protesters occupying the presidential secretariat. Police violently attacked the anti-government activists, arresting nine and injuring many others. Since then, the police have conducted a witch hunt against protesters, with dozens arrested so far. Wickremesinghe has publicly slandered those involved in demonstrations as “fascists” and “terrorists,” when it is in fact his government that is resorting to police state measures to terrorise the population.

Wickremesinghe, a longtime enforcer of International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands, is moving to impose its austerity measures. Like his predecessor, his aim is to force the masses to pay for Sri Lanka’s deep economic crisis. The IMF is demanding the destruction of tens of thousands of public-sector jobs, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, higher taxes, drastic cuts to public education and health, and other harsh social attacks.

To strengthen his hand, Wickremesinghe is attempting to establish an all-party government to implement these measures and suppress the mass opposition of workers and the poor.

Despite their tactical differences, all the parliamentary parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, and the trade unions support the IMF’s austerity program.

Addressing a student mobilisation near Fort Railway Station in Colombo on Sunday to protest the arrest of the student activists, FSP propaganda secretary Duminda Nagamuwa cautioned Wickremesinghe: “As you are aware, the PTA issue is closely tied to the GSP Plus

[Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus], so do this [detention of students] cautiously.”

Tied to the capitalist framework, the FSP, which controls the IUSF leadership, is warning Wickremesinghe that Sri Lankan capitalism would lose its EU tax concessions under GSP Plus, and profits, if he continues to violate democratic rights.

These appeals to Wickremesinghe and the ruling elites will not force them to change course. Nor will any major global power defend the democratic and social rights of Sri Lankan workers and the poor.

The fight to secure the immediate and unconditional release of Mudalige, Gunatilake and Siridamma, and the dropping of the fabricated charges against all bailed-out students, must be taken forward through the independent mobilisation of the working class and the rallying of the rural poor against the Wickremesinghe government on the basis of a socialist perspective.

Sri Lankan students must turn to the working class take up this fight for democratic rights, which must include the repeal of the PTA, all emergency laws and the Essential Public Services Act, and abolition of the executive presidency and all other repressive measures.

The SEP calls for workers and rural masses to build their own action committees in workplaces, estates and in the major economic centres, as well as in the rural areas, to take the fight for social and democratic rights into their hands. These organisations must be built independently of the trade unions and the capitalist parties. We urge students to build IYSSE branches in their respective universities.

The SEP’s fight for a “Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses,” which will be based on these action committees, is in order to take forward the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government and the implementation of socialist policies. This is part of the broader fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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