

SEP (Sri Lanka) denounces violent assault by ruling party thugs on its members

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
4 December 2023

Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena, the president and secretary of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS) or Peoples Progressive Employees Union branch in Moratuwa University, violently attacked two members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) on Thursday evening.

PPSS is a trade union controlled by the right-wing ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), led by former president and prime minister Mahinda Rajapakse, which elected current President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

One of the SEP members who was grievously injured in the attack is Dehin Wasantha. He has been a non-academic employee at Moratuwa University for more than 25 years. Wasantha is a member of the Sri Lanka Technical Officers Union and well known among workers and students in the university as a fighter for socialist policies and their rights. The other SEP member who was attacked is Lakshman Fernando, a full-time party worker.

The SEP denounces this vicious attack and calls upon workers, youth and students in Sri Lanka and internationally to defend our party's democratic right to freely engage in its political activities. The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

We demand that the culprits be punished with the full force of the law.

The attack took place while an SEP team was campaigning at the rear gate of the Moratuwa campus for upcoming public meetings to be addressed by Joseph Kishore, the national secretary of the SEP (US). They were distributing a notice titled "SEP (US) national secretary to visit Sri Lanka to speak on the centenary of Trotskyism."

The SEP comrades were about to conclude their campaign at about six in the evening as there was a low movement of students.

As stated later in a formal complaint to the police, the two union officials, Perera and Piyawardena, arrived in a three-wheeler taxi, armed with long wooden clubs.

They rushed at Wasantha yelling: "We will finish you up today. We will not let you come back to the campus again." Perera tried to hit Wasantha's head with a wooden club, which could have been a deadly blow.

Wasantha avoided the attack but another blow injured his left hand, fracturing two fingers (medically 4th and 5th metacarpal fractures). Piyawardena also attacked Wasantha, smashing his spectacles.

Lakshman was also attacked, causing a neck injury, with bruises

and scratches to the back of his body.

The two thugs left when other SEP members arrived.

This attack was pre-planned. The thugs knew the SEP members were campaigning on that day through some of their student abettors, who accompanied them and watched the violent attack on our comrades.

The attackers knew Wasantha very well as a fighter for the SEP's international socialist policies. He is a leading campaigner for the rights of non-academic employees, exposing the union bureaucracy's pro-government and pro-capitalist policies.

In union meetings, these bureaucrats have routinely tried to prevent him speaking, also sometimes trying to physically attack him. In particular, they have expressed hostility to Wasantha's campaign to establish independent workers' action committees.

Our comrades, accompanied by the party's lawyer, went to the Moratuwa police station and lodged a complaint. As their condition was serious, the police took them to the nearby Lunawa public hospital. As there was no x-ray facility there, the next day Wasantha was sent to Colombo South Teaching Hospital, where fractures were found in his left hand.

On Saturday, both comrades were discharged from hospital, but advised to take medical precautions. Wasantha's left hand has been bandaged and cannot be used until the fractures heal. He has to go to a clinic for further treatment. Plasters have been placed on Lakshman's face, neck and back.

The two union officials were taken into custody and remanded on Friday. However, despite being legally required to do so, the police did not take custody of the taxi used to transport the thugs, although the lawyer provided them with its number.

Perera and Piyawardena were produced before an acting magistrate in Moratuwa on Saturday.

At the magistrate's inquiry, the attorney-at-law appearing for the SEP explained that the two had blatantly violated the fundamental right guaranteed by the country's constitution, i.e., freedom of expression. He said that they had used their close connection with the ruling party to conspire against SEP members and organise the physical assault, which could have been deadly.

In court, the lawyer produced the leaflet that was distributed by the SEP team. He explained that the SEP was not only a national political party recognised by the country's election commission but also a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), known worldwide for its principled politics.

The lawyer reiterated that the assault on the members of this

party should be considered as a criminal attack on the basic democratic rights of anybody and society as a whole to engage in politics.

Explaining how trade union leaders work as thugs backed by the ruling party, he pointed out that this was not a spontaneous attack. It was a premeditated crime, as the thugs had hired the three-wheeler taxi, obtained wooden poles as weapons, followed the SEP members and attacked them in the middle of the road.

The lawyer argued that releasing Perera and Piyawardena from custody would be harmful to SEP members as the pair could use their close political connections with the ruling party.

The police downplayed the incident, telling the acting magistrate that the victims received minor injuries, paving the way for Perera and Piyawardena to be bailed. The magistrate questioned the police as to why they had not seized the taxi.

The lawyer told the WWSWS that the police had shown bias in favour of the two thugs.

The acting magistrate granted bail to the accused, subject to strict conditions including providing 500,000 rupees (\$US1,523) in two personal sureties, and reporting to the police every Sunday.

The accused were warned not to disrupt the political activities of the SEP.

The SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) will campaign to defend our comrades and the party's democratic right to carry on its political activities.

These trade union leaders at the Moratuwa campus are part of the SLPP's goon squads, which operate in many workplaces to silence opposition among workers.

The ruling party is desperate because it is utterly discredited among the masses. The SLPP regime of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse was ousted last year by a popular upsurge of millions of workers, rural poor and youth. Masses of people took to the streets, denouncing the regime for heaping on them the massive burdens of an unprecedented capitalist economic crisis.

Former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse directed thousands of goons, including those in its trade unions, to unleash violence on the protesting people occupying the Galle Face Green, in Colombo on May 9 last year.

However, amid the popular outrage, his government collapsed. Discredited, Gotabhaya Rajapakse fled the country and resigned the presidency. Exploiting the betrayal of the workers' upsurge by the trade union bureaucracies and pseudo-left groups, the SLPP conspired with sections of the ruling elite to elevate pro-US stooge Wickremesinghe to the executive presidency.

Wickremesinghe and the SLPP are ruthlessly implementing the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity program, slashing jobs, wages and pensions, privatising, cutting social programs, including public health and education, and increasing the prices of essentials to unbearable levels.

The Wickremesinghe regime is facing enormous opposition from workers, students and rural poor as a result. While seeking to block this mass opposition by using the trade union bureaucracies, it is also unleashing the repressive police-military machinery and goon squads to crush the growing opposition.

The government and its supporters, including the union bureaucracies, are particularly nervous about the growing

influence of the socialist program advanced by the SEP among workers and students against its attacks on living conditions and the suppression of democratic rights.

The SEP leaflet that was distributed by the party's campaigners explained:

The eruption of imperialist war, including the murderous siege by the Zionist state of Israel against the Palestinians, confronts the international working class and youth with all the unresolved problems of the 20th century. All the burning issues facing workers and the oppressed masses—social inequality, war, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, state repression and the rise of authoritarianism and fascism—are international problems and require a global and revolutionary solution by the working class.

The entire South Asian region, including Sri Lanka, has been dragged into a global maelstrom of geopolitical tensions, as US imperialism intensifies its war preparations against China. What is needed is a powerful socialist and global anti-war movement of the working class.

This is the program on which the SEP is based. We urge workers, youth and students to send protest letters condemning this attack and demanding action against the culprits to the relevant authorities in Sri Lanka.

The letters should be sent to the following addresses (with copies to the SEP's email address: wswscmb@slt.net.lk)

- Senior Professor N.D. Gunwaedena, Vice Chancellor, University of Moratuwa
Email: vc@uom.lk or ndg@uom.lk
- Attorney General, Mr. Sanjay Rajaratnam
Email: agdurgentmotions@gmail.com

We also call on workers and youth to attend our important public meetings addressed by comrade Joseph Kishore, the US SEP national secretary, in Peradeniya, on December 7 at 3 p.m. at Hall no. 86, Political Science Department in the University of Peradeniya and in Colombo, on December 10 at 3 p.m. at New Town Hall.



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact