

Protest letters from New Zealand and Australia condemn pro-government violence against Sri Lankan SEP members

Our reporters
26 December 2023

Workers, students, youth, academics and their organisations are sending protest letters condemning the violent attack on two members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka by pro-government thugs. Dehin Wasantha is a veteran university worker, who is a well-known fighter for workers' rights and socialism, and Lakshman Fernando is a full-time SEP party worker.

The letters to the Sri Lankan Attorney General and Vice Chancellor of the University of Moratuwa have demanded the culprits be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Fernando and Wasantha were physically assaulted at the University of Moratuwa on November 30 by Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena—the president and secretary of the Moratuwa university branch of Podujana Pragathishile Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS). The PPSS is a trade union affiliated to the ruling Sri Lankan Podujana Peramuna party.

The two SEP members were campaigning with other party members at the rear gate of the university for SEP public meetings on the Centenary of Trotskyism addressed by Joseph Kishore, National Secretary of the SEP (US). They were attacked with long wooden clubs causing serious injuries.

Wasantha suffered two fractured fingers, while Lakshman was badly bruised and left with a neck injury. Both were immediately admitted to hospital. On doctor's advice, Wasantha is on lengthy medical leave, as his fractured fingers will take a considerable period to mend.

The attack could have been fatal if Wasantha had not avoided a blow aimed at his head. The Moratuwa Magistrate Court is due to hear the case against Perera and Piyawardena on January 8.

The SEP and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) around the world are campaigning in defence of Fernando and Wasantha, and the SEP's democratic right to campaign at Moratuwa University and any other places.

We are publishing below letters sent by the Socialist Equality Group (SEG) in New Zealand and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Victoria University of Wellington as well as statements from university students in

Australia.

The SEG in New Zealand the IYSSE at Victoria University of Wellington:

The Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at Victoria University of Wellington condemn the violent assault on members of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando.

The evidence is clear: Two SEP members were seriously injured in a premeditated attack by officials from the People's Progressive Employees Union, a trade union controlled by the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna. This is the party that leads the deeply unpopular government which is imposing brutal austerity measures on the Sri Lankan working class and driving millions into poverty.

We join the SEP in demanding that these union-government thugs are punished to the full extent of the law. Their aim was to stop the SEP from speaking with students outside the Moratuwa University about the party's upcoming public meeting on the centenary of Trotskyism to be addressed by Joseph Kishore, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in US.

This was an attack not only on the SEP but on the right of students and workers to learn about and freely discuss the historic struggle for socialism led by the Fourth International. The fact that the state cannot tolerate open discussion on this subject points to the profound social and political crisis wracking the Wickremesinghe government, which has no popular support or legitimacy.

This is the same regime that violently suppressed the mass protest movement over the past two years against social inequality and poverty. The government and its union backers are terrified that young people, who are looking for a way to fight against war, dictatorship and inequality, will be attracted by the internationalist and socialist perspective of the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International.

This is not only a Sri Lankan issue. In the past two months, groups and individuals protesting against Israel's genocide in Gaza have been slandered and censored, and sometimes

subjected to police brutality and violence, in the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

The SEG and IYSSE in New Zealand call on our supporters and readers in New Zealand to oppose the politically-motivated violence against the SEP in Sri Lanka. It reflects the global turn by governments towards authoritarian and fascist methods to suppress opposition and, above all, to try and stop the development of a socialist movement among workers and youth. The ruling class must not be allowed to succeed.

Hands off the SEP! Defend free speech and stop the attacks on socialism!

Statements by Australian university students:

Youp, University of Newcastle

My name is Youp, I'm an IYSSE member in Australia and I wholeheartedly oppose the attack on my Sri Lankan comrades. Freedom of speech is an absolutely fundamental right and nobody deserves to be beaten or killed over their beliefs. The fact that this vicious attack was premeditated speaks volumes about the politics of the PPSS and SLPP—they cannot beat us politically, so they have to resort to sticks. I think the perpetrators should be treated with true due process and face the full force of the law.

Thenuki, La Trobe University

The reported attack on members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka is deeply troubling, highlighting serious threats to democratic rights and political freedoms. The violence against political activists challenges the fundamental principles of free expression and open discourse essential for a robust democratic society. The alleged affiliation of the attackers with a ruling party-linked trade union raises concerns about the impartiality of law enforcement and the protection of political opposition. This incident underscores the imperative of fostering a secure and inclusive political environment where diverse voices can be expressed without fear, emphasising dialogue over violence.

The police response, as outlined in the article, is criticised for potential biases and inadequacies in safeguarding victims' rights, with concerns raised about the downplaying of the incident and the failure to seize the attackers' taxi, potentially eroding public trust in law enforcement. The situation underscores the critical importance of a transparent and impartial law enforcement system in any democratic society and highlights the need for a thorough investigation to ensure accountability and deterrence against political violence.

Grace, Victoria University

I am appalled by the pre-meditated attack on Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, members of the SEP in Sri Lanka, by trade union bureaucrats. These SEP members were expressing political beliefs in favour of unifying the working class and oppressed peoples, causing no harm. Their lives have been disrupted due to President Wickremesinghe's right-wing

regime and the violence it actively facilitates. Wickremesinghe harbours no sympathy for workers and students, and his use of militaristic means to prevent opposition to his political decisions is horrifying.

Zach, IYSSE President at Western Sydney University

The attacks on Dehin Vasantha and Lakshman Fernando at the Moratuwa University on November 30 are appalling. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality of Western Sydney University stands opposed to this vile attack on our comrades to whom we sincerely wish a speedy recovery.

The fact that armed SLPP goons with links to the state and the trade unions have been employed to interfere in our campaign and incapacitate our members is not a first. This development comes as a tremendous sign of weakness and restlessness from the capitalist class and their lackeys in the unions, not only in Colombo but internationally. They will not succeed, but only expose themselves to the working class and turn it against them.

The culprits must be put on trial and prosecuted. Whether the Sri Lankan courts will do this is unlikely without pressure from the working class. In any case, our appeals are not to the bourgeois courts for justice but to the far greater social force in Sri Lanka and around the world. If the state is unable to deliver then we will fight for it in the working class.

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The SEP is calling on all those who are concerned to defend democratic rights and freedom of expression to register their opposition by sending protest letters to the following addresses of relevant authorities with copies to the SEP (wswscmb@sltnet.lk).

Senior Professor N.D. Gunawardena, Vice Chancellor, University of Moratuwa

Email: vc@uom.lk or ndg@uom.lk

Attorney General, Mr. Sanjay Rajaratnam

Email: agdurgentmotions@gmail.com



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact