Sri Lankan workers condemn pro-government thug attack on SEP members

Our reporters
29 December 2023

Several workers' action committees in Sri Lanka have joined their class brothers and sisters around the world in sending protest letters condemning the violent attack on two Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members in Sri Lanka by pro-government thugs.

Those attacked were Dehin Wasantha, a veteran university worker and a well-known fighter for workers' rights and socialism, and Lakshman Fernando, a full-time SEP party worker.

The workers' action committee letters were sent to the Sri Lankan attorney general and the vice chancellor of the University of Moratuwa with copies to the SEP, in response to the campaign launched by the SEP internationally.

Wasantha and Fernando 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 the Podujana Pragathishili 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 near 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 and is on extended medical leave because his fingers will take a considerable period to mend. Lakshman was badly bruised and left with a neck injury.

The Moratuwa Magistrates Court is due to hear the case against Perera and Piyawardena on January 8. The Moratuwa University administration has not yet initiated an inquiry against the culprits.

We publish below letters sent by the Health Workers' Action Committee (HWAC), the Railway Workers' Action Committee (RWAC) and the Port Workers' Action Committee (PWAC).

Health Workers' Action Committee (HWAC):

To: Senior Professor N.D. Gunwardena, Vice Chancellor, University of Moratuwa

To: Attorney General: Mr Sanjay Rajaratnam

Dear Sirs,

In relation to a physical attack on two members of the Socialist Equality Party by two trade union leaders at Moratuwa University.

On November 30, 2023, two trade union leaders from Moratuwa University, Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena, attacked two members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, near the same university.

The attack was carried out during a campaign by SEP members among students, youth and workers for a meeting to be held in Colombo to celebrate the "Centenary of Trotskyism."

Perera and Piyawardena, who carried out the attack, act as the president and secretary of the Moratuwa University branch of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS). As this trade union is led by the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, the main party of the current government, there is every likelihood that this attack was planned with the knowledge of the government.

Dehin Wasantha, who was assaulted, is a long-time non-academic employee of the University of Moratuwa. He has been a fighter for the rights of students and workers for many years, exposing the treacherous activities of the trade unions and fighting for the independent mobilisation of workers on socialist principles. The other victim, Lakshman Fernando, is a full-time SEP member.

As Perera and Piyawardena came in a hired three-wheel taxi armed with wooden clubs to carry out the attack, it was very clear that it was a planned attack. They [Wasantha and Fernando] were also beaten with wooden sticks and threatened with death. As a result of the attack, Wasantha has sustained fractures in two fingers of his hand. It is serious bodily harm. So far, the relevant medical staff have given Wasantha 28 days' leave for further treatment, after providing initial treatment. Lakshman, who was hit, sustained injuries on his neck and back.

This is a serious anti-democratic attack against the right of the SEP to engage in its politics among workers and youth, and against the right of the workers and youth to be informed about the SEP's politics.

This is not just an attack on Wasantha, Fernando and the SEP. It is part of the overall attack by capitalist governments and trade union bureaucrats internationally against the building of an independent movement of workers in Sri Lanka, as well as around the world.

The HWAC recognises this as a brutal attack on the democratic rights of the entire working class. Any leniency given to the perpetrators will only encourage future attacks against workers' democratic rights by increasing mob groups.

The HWAC hereby requests that, taking these facts into account, the culprits be punished to the fullest extent of the law to protect the democratic rights of the members of the Socialist Equality Party, the members of the Action Committees and all workers, youth and students to engage in their political activities.

(This request was unanimously adopted at the Health Workers' Action Committee meeting held on December 21, 2023.)

Yours faithfully
Sanjeeva Subasingha,
Secretary
Health Workers' Action Committee

Railway Workers' Action Committee:

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The Railway Workers' Action Committee (RWAC) denounces the attack carried out by ruling party thugs on SEP members.

The RWAC condemns with contempt the attack on Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, two members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka who were campaigning in front of a gate at the University of Moratuwa on November 30. These thugs are Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena, branch president and secretary of the Podujana Pragathisili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS) respectively.

Wasantha, a veteran non-academic worker and famous for fighting to defend the independent interests of workers, and Fernando, a full-time SEP member, were seriously injured in this incident.

The PPSS is a trade union led by the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). The SLPP is the party which undemocratically chose Ranil Wickremesinghe as president and is led by the former President and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse.

The SEP members were campaigning to publicise meetings in Colombo and Kandy on the centenary of the world Trotskyist movement to be addressed by Joseph Kishore, the national secretary of the SEP (US).

On the said day, SEP comrades were about to stop the campaign by 6 p.m., when the movement of students was lessening. Two thugs threatened SEP members and came back in a three-wheeler armed with long poles. They especially targeted Wasantha and attacked him, shouting that they would not allow him to come again into the university. Fernando had serious wounds in his neck, face and back.

This incident shows how angry the union bureaucracy is about Wasantha's principled politics, exposing their treacherous and pro-government record among workers and students. This is a conscious and calculated attack. The union bureaucracy has especially expressed their open hostility to Wasantha's call for workers' independent action committees.

The RWAC demands that maximum legal action be taken against these thugs, whose activities are a threat against anyone who is involved in principled politics.

While the RWAC works among the workers to expose this attack, it appeals to railway workers to defend the SEP's right to engage in its political work. The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

Marlon Fernando
Secretary
Railway Workers' Action Committee

Port Workers' Action Committee:

To: Senior Professor N.D. Gunwardena, Vice Chancellor, University of Moratuwa

To: Attorney General: Mr Sanjay Rajaratnam

Condemnation of the brutal attack on the Sri Lankan SEP members by the ruling party thugs

The Port Workers' Action Committee (PWAC) strongly condemns the violent attack on Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members, Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando.

The two SEP members were attacked while they were campaigning and distributing leaflets near the University of Moratuwa to publicise a Colombo SEP public meeting. Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena—the president and secretary of the Moratuwa University branch of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS)—severely attacked the two SEP members. Both SEP members were injured in the violence.

This appears to be a brutal attack on behalf of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), a part of President Wickremesinghe's right-wing government, which is implementing the austerity programs of the International Monetary Fund. This is an attack on the democratic right of the SEP to freely engage in its activities.

The pre-planned attack is part of an ongoing attack on democratic rights and freedom of speech in Sri Lanka. The government is carrying out repressive measures to suppress protests among workers against the government's IMF-dictated attacks on jobs, wages, social conditions and basic rights.

We, the workers of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority and related services, are facing the government's attacks and repressive measures under privatisation and cuts in working conditions, and we will unite with the rest of the Sri Lankan working class and the international working class to defend the democratic rights of the SEP.

This is an attack on the international working class. These attacks were directed at SEP members who were campaigning and encouraging students and workers to attend meetings addressed by SEP (United States) National Secretary Joe Kishore. The campaign explained the century-long struggle of the Trotskyist movement to defend and develop Marxism and its contemporary relevance to the struggle for international socialism.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite and the leaders of the PPSS are terrified of the powerful perspective of the Trotskyist movement that has deep roots in the history of the Sri Lankan working class.

We demand that the culprits be punished with the full force of the law and that the SEP's right to freely engage in campaigns be assured.

On behalf of the Port Workers' Action Committee,
Convener,
Jothipala Dadigama
Port Workers' Action Committee

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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 the 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

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