

Academics denounce pro-government thug attack on Sri Lankan SEP members

Our reporters
2 January 2024

Academics have joined workers and youth around the world in 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 protest letters to the Sri Lankan Attorney General and Vice Chancellor of the University of Moratuwa have demanded the maximum legal action against the culprits.

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 Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS). The PPSS is a trade union affiliated with 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 had to take nearly a month's medical leave, as his fingers took a considerable period to mend. Lakshman was badly bruised and left with a neck injury. Wasantha reported back to his work at the university only yesterday.

The Moratuwa Magistrate's Court is due to hear the case against Perera and Piyawardena on January 8. The Moratuwa university administration has not yet started an inquiry against the culprits.

We are publishing below letters sent by academics from Australia, Hong Kong and Sri Lanka.

Professor Micheal Head from Australia:

As a university educator and socialist, I condemn in the strongest possible manner the vicious assault by supporters of the Sri Lankan government on two members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) on November 30 at Moratuwa University.

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 Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, causing severe injuries.

Both the victims are well known members of the SEP internationally.

Wasantha has been a non-academic employee at Moratuwa University for more than 25 years. He is highly regarded among workers and students in the university as a fighter for socialist policies and their rights. Fernando is a full-time SEP party worker.

There is no doubt that this was a politically-motivated assault that represents a fundamental attack on the basic democratic rights of the SEP, all university staff and students and the working class as a whole.

The video of the assault, posted on the *World Socialist Web Site*, clearly shows the brutal and potentially life-threatening nature of the attack by Perera and Piyawardena, armed with long wooden clubs. The photographs on the WWSW of the injuries sustained by Wasantha and Fernando also testify to the violent character of the assault.

This is all the more serious because the 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.

I support the demand of the SEP that the culprits be punished with the full force of the law.

This is an international political issue.

As the SEP's lawyer told the court hearing when Perera and Piyawardena were produced before an acting magistrate in Moratuwa, the SEP is not only a national political party recognised by the country's election commission. It is a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), known worldwide for its principled socialist politics.

This is doubly serious because these trade union officials 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 Gotabaya Rajapakse was ousted last year by a popular upsurge of millions of workers, rural poor and youth for imposing on them the burden of an unprecedented capitalist economic crisis.

Wickremesinghe and the SLPP are ruthlessly implementing an 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 the rural poor as a result. While seeking to block this mass resistance by using the trade union apparatuses to stifle and limit the unrest, it is also unleashing the repressive police-military machinery and thugs to crush the deepening opposition.

I join the SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in denouncing this attack and calling for the defence of their members and the SEP's democratic right to carry on its political activities.

Regards,

Professor Michael Head
Australia

Chris Gordon, Macquarie University in Sydney:

Dear Professor N.D. Gunawardena,

I am a lecturer at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia.

I wish to condemn, in the strongest terms, the attack on members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando.

The attack was carried out at Moratuwa University by Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena, leading members of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS)—the Peoples Progressive Employees Union. This union is aligned with the IMF agenda of the government—against the interests of workers.

The attack was carried out because the SEP members are principled defenders of the interests of workers and have consistently exposed the sell-outs of the unions. Having no answer to the political analysis of the SEP, the unions can only resort to violence against the SEP.

The SEP is conducting a fight for a socialist perspective among the youth, cutting across rotten nationalistic and communal perspectives; the SEP is seeking to win youth on principles of socialist internationalism. This perspective is the antithesis of that pushed by the unions.

The attack was an attempt to silence the SEP. This attack on the democratic rights to free speech, and to advance a political program, must be opposed.

That the attack against members of the SEP was pre-meditated is clear from the description of events, as explained on the World Socialist Web Site.

The perpetrators of the attack need to be held responsible for their actions and receive a punishment appropriate for a pre-meditated attack which could have had deadly consequences.

Regards,

Chris Gordon
Macquarie University
Australia

Professor Joseph Scalice from Hong Kong:

I am writing to add my voice to the public condemnation of the cowardly and vicious attack carried out by Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena, the president and secretary of the PPSS, on Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, two members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

The attack was premeditated and could quite likely have killed the SEP members who were exercising their free speech rights in building for a public political meeting. Any toleration shown for this attack will set a dangerous precedent for attacks on free speech and basic democratic rights. The culprits must be punished with the full force of

the law.

I extend my heartfelt solidarity to Wasantha and Fernando. Their political courage and conviction are inspiring to workers around the world.

Sincerely,
Prof. Joseph Scalice
History Department
Hong Kong Baptist University

Sumudu Walakuluge, a lecturer from Sri Lanka:

Dear Comrades,
And the authorities this may concern,

I unequivocally condemn the brutal and cowardly assault and acts of violence committed against two SEP members by the officials of the PPSS union affiliated with the ruling SLPP government which is in alliance with President Ranil Wickremesinghe. While the government is attempting to build up a Police State in the guise of the establishment of peace and order, unofficial thugs supported by the ruling parties attack the democratic rights of the movements that defend workers' rights. All who appreciate democracy should now stand in solidarity with the SEP and the international workers' movement.

This cowardly attack was launched at a moment when the international working class vehemently united all the possible forces that share the same interest in socialist internationalism. While the international bourgeoisie has started brutal wars to attack such developments, their local thugs are launching cowardly attacks against the democratic rights of the growing workers' forces. These thugs should be held accountable to the full extent of the law.

State terrorism and the acts of violence against unarmed activists are never justified. I am urging all who love democracy to join me in condemning in the strongest possible terms the acts of violence committed against the SEP members.

Sumudu Walakuluge
Lecturer
Department of Political Science
University of Peradeniya

Sri Lanka.

* * * *

The SEP is calling on all those who are concerned to defend democratic rights of 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 WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact