

Magistrate court hearing on violent assault on Sri Lankan SEP members

Our reporters
11 January 2024

The legal case about last year's violent assault on Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando was presented to a judge at the Moratuwa Magistrate Court on January 8.

Wasantha, who works at Moratuwa University, is well known among non-academic employees for his intransigent fight for the interests of working class and socialist policies; Lakshman Fernando is a fulltime SEP worker.

The accused—Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena who are on bail—both appeared at the Moratuwa Magistrate Court. They are the president and secretary respectively of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS) or People's Progressive Employees Union branch at Moratuwa University.

The attack occurred on November 30, when a SEP team, including Wasantha and Fernando, was campaigning at the rear gate of the Moratuwa University. The team was campaigning for public meetings to be addressed by SEP (US) national secretary Joseph Kishore.

As stated in a formal complaint to the police lodged on November 30, Perera and Piyawardena ordered the SEP campaigners to leave the rear gate. The two PPSS officials returned shortly after in a three-wheeler taxi. Armed with long wooden clubs, they violently attacked the SEP campaigners, grievously injuring Wasantha's left hand. Lakshman suffered a neck injury with bruises and scratches to the back of his body.

Perera and Piyawardena were taken into custody by Moratuwa police the next day and brought before the Moratuwa acting magistrate on December 2. After an initial inquiry, the accused were granted bail, subject to strict conditions, including two 500,000-rupee (\$US1,523) deposits in personal sureties and weekly reporting to the police.

On January 8, the police outlined to the magistrate the complaint made by SEP member Dehin Wasantha and the progress of their investigation into the assault. While police investigators have visited the crime scene and recorded statements from witnesses, they requested further time to

obtain and produce relevant medical reports from the hospitals where the victims were treated.

The attorney appearing for the SEP highlighted the grave nature of the attack. He outlined what a report on Wasantha's injuries will say, including fractures to two fingers of his left hand. The lawyer said that Wasantha could not work for about one month because of the fractures.

Lawyers for the accused complained that the SEP had issued a leaflet describing the incident as a provocation. They did not comment on its contents, however.

The magistrate concluded the hearing and ordered the case to be referred to a mandatory Mediation Board. The case will be recalled to court on May 20.

The SEP and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) around the world have launched a campaign in defence of Fernando and Wasantha and the SEP's democratic right to conduct political campaigns.

Workers, young people, academics, and their organisations internationally have sent protest letters to the Sri Lankan attorney general and the vice chancellor of the University of Moratuwa, with copies to the SEP, demanding maximum legal actions against the accused. Some of the most recent protest letters are published below.

Jerry White, a leading SEP member in the US:

I emphatically denounce the violent attack on Socialist Equality Party members Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando by leading officials of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS) union at Moratuwa University on Thursday evening, November 30. Comrades Wasantha and Fernando were seriously injured in the attack.

As a member of the Socialist Equality Party in the US and the SEP's former US presidential candidate who traveled to Sri Lanka in 2012 as part of a worldwide campaign tour, I demand that the two assailants, PPSS branch president Indika Perera and branch secretary Suranga Piyawardena, be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

The SEP in Sri Lanka has a long and proud history of fighting for the working class and socialism and its members

have every right to freely engage in political activities. The violent assault on our comrades was a premeditated crime, which was aimed at silencing and intimidating all workers and young people who oppose austerity, social inequality, and war. Such methods are not exclusive to Sri Lanka. In every country, capitalist governments are attempting—and failing—to suppress the mass protests against the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The PPSS is backed by the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) whose hated former President Gotabaya Rajapakse was driven out of power in 2022 by a popular uprising of millions of workers, rural poor and youth. Now, President Ranil Wickremesinghe and the SLPP are implementing a brutal IMF austerity program and think that they can suppress opposition with threats and violence from their PPSS thugs.

Wasantha has been a non-academic employee at Moratuwa University for more than 25 years. He 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. Because of this, PPSS bureaucrats have repeatedly tried to prevent him speaking at union meetings and have threatened him with physical violence.

At the time of the assault, Wasantha and Fernando were 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). Kishore visited Sri Lanka to speak on the centenary of the founding of the Left Opposition by Leon Trotsky and the need to develop an international anti-war movement to stop the genocide in Gaza and US imperialism's threat of a new world war.

The SEP in the US and the International Committee of the Fourth International will not tolerate this blatant act of political repression and censorship against members of our sister party in Sri Lanka. American workers are very familiar with goon attacks by trade union bureaucrats. We will inform them about the assault at Moratuwa University and the complicity of the police. At the same time, we will also inform workers and young people protesting the US-backed Israeli slaughter of Palestinian men, women, and children.

Once again, I demand that the authorities immediately prosecute the assailants and uphold the right of the SEP to freely engage in political activity.

Your truly,

Jerry White

SEP member, United States

H. Jowsey, from the US:

I condemn in the strongest terms the November 30, 2023 assault by Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS)

union officials Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena against Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, which caused grievous injuries and could have had fatal consequences.

The union thugs assaulted SEP comrades with bats to stop them campaigning for an international meeting by US SEP national secretary Joseph Kishore at Peradeniya University on December 7 and in Colombo on December 10.

Workers in Sri Lanka and around the world must come to the defense of SEP members against the thugs of the PPSS union bureaucracy & its political party the SLPP, which is responsible for the hated government of Ranil Wickremesinghe! We must defend the SEP & Fourth International's democratic right to freely engage in political activities!

The unelected Wickremesinghe government, with SLPP aid, is ruthlessly implementing the austerity program of the IMF—slashing jobs, wages, and pensions, privatizing government bodies, cutting social programs, including public health and education, and increasing the prices of essentials to unbearable levels. The government is unleashing goon squads from the trade union bureaucracies and using the repressive police-military machinery to try to crush the opposition of workers, students, and the rural poor.

H. Jowsey,
Detroit, Michigan

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The SEP is calling on defenders of 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