

Opposition grows against pro-government thug attack on Sri Lankan SEP members

Our reporters
31 January 2024

Protest letters continue to be sent from workers, youth and their organisations around the world condemning the violent attack by pro-government thugs on Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, both members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka.

Wasantha is a university non-academic worker for more than two decades and a well-known fighter for workers' rights and socialism. Fernando is a full-time SEP party worker. They were physically assaulted by Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena at the University of Moratuwa on November 30.

Perera and Piyawardena are the president and secretary respectively of the Moratuwa university branch of Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS), which is affiliated to the ruling party—the Sri Lankan Podujana Peramuna.

Wasantha and Fernando were campaigning with other party members near the back gate of the university for SEP public meetings on the Centenary of Trotskyism to be 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 go on nearly one-month medical leave, as his fingers took a considerable period to mend. Lakshman was badly bruised and left with a neck injury.

When the case was brought before the Magistrates Court in Moratuwa on January 8, the judge ordered it to be referred to a mandatory Mediation Board. The case will be heard in court on May 20. When the Mediation Board met to review the case on January 20, Perera and Piyawardena were not present. The board decided to reconvene the case on February 3.

The campaign launched by the SEP and its sister parties of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in defence of Wasantha and Fernando and the SEP's democratic rights has won a strong response in Sri Lanka and internationally with many protest letters, condemning the attack and demanding maximum legal actions against the accused culprits.

We publish below protest letters recently sent by academics in the US and UK and two leading *World Socialist Web Site* writers.

Professor Thomas Mackaman, King's College, Pennsylvania, United States

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

I write to protest the violent attack on Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando at Moratuwa University on November 30, as they carried on peaceful political activity, notifying students and workers of an upcoming, public lecture, "Leon Trotsky and the Struggle for Socialism in the Twenty-First Century." I further demand that the two assailants who carried out this attack on behalf of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS) union be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

As a university chancellor you have an obligation to vigorously protect peaceful political and intellectual activity at your campus. That this violent assault targeted Wasantha and Fernando while they advertised for a lecture on history and politics is an attack on the rights of all students and workers at Moratuwa University and indeed throughout Sri Lanka. If these thugs are allowed to go with the slap on the wrist thus far administered by magistrates, it will only encourage further violent attacks. This will inevitably have a chilling effect on freedom of expression, academic freedom, and intellectual endeavor.

Therefore, I again urge you to use your good offices to insist on the protection of freedom of expression at your campus and the fullest possible prosecution of the violent criminals, Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena.

I am carbon copying Attorney General, Mr. Sanjay Rajaratnam, who I assume has the legal duty to prosecute this egregious and violent attempt to suppress peaceful political activity.

Sincerely,
Thomas Mackaman
John H.A. Whitman Distinguished Service Professor
Department of History
King's College
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

Professor Jean Shaoul, University of Manchester, United Kingdom:

Vice Chancellor, University of Moratuwa

Dear Professor N.D. Gunawardena,

I am writing as a former senior academic who worked in

several UK universities to condemn the deliberate and unprovoked physical attack by President Inkida Perera and Secretary Suranga Piyawardena of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (People's Progressive Employees Union) branch in Moratuwa University, Sri Lanka, on Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, members of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka), on Thursday November 30.

Perera and Piyawardena came armed with long wooden clubs and attacked Dehin Wasantha, a non-academic employee at Moratuwa University for more than 25 years, and Lakshman Fernando, injuring them both to the extent that they required hospital treatment. Their aim was to stop the leafleting for a meeting for a socialist comrade from America to speak on the centenary of Trotskyism, the movement that embodies the modern struggle for socialist internationalism.

The assault constitutes a criminal attack not only on the basic democratic rights of the SEP, a national political party recognised by the country's election commission that is committed to socialist internationalism, but on all those who try to engage in politics. As such, the attack must be condemned by the University, its staff and students.

Millions of people around the world have taken part in mass protests against Israel's genocide in Gaza, including many educators and students, both Arab and Jewish. They fear that Israel's assault on Gaza, coupled with its denial of food, fuel, electricity and even water, threatens an expansion of a broader world war between the US, Iran, Russia and China.

They recognise that the war, which has the full support of all the major powers, constitutes not just an attack on Palestinians in Gaza but on the most basic democratic and social rights of all workers and youth internationally. This is because all these governments are clamping down on freedom of expression and opposition to their policies of war, austerity, authoritarianism and refusal to take any measures to prevent or even limit climate change that threatens the entire planet with catastrophe, international problems that require a global and revolutionary solution by the working class.

It is therefore of particular concern to workers like myself that thugs from a trade union tried to intimidate and attack SEP members, including a member of the University, campaigning on these issues, in a bid to silence opposition among workers. In so doing, they discredit the name of their organisation as it is the opposite of progressive and works to divide working people. It is all the more disturbing that this should take place at a university where the principles of science, rationality and free discussion are so vital.

I call on you to do everything in your power to ensure that these

culprits are brought to justice and that the University defends democratic rights, including the right to disseminate political ideas among staff and students, and the rights of students to know about these ideas.

Yours sincerely,
Professor Emirita Jean Shaoul
University of Manchester
UK

David Walsh and Joanne Laurier, WSWs writers in US:

Dear sirs,

We have been made aware of the scandalous attack on Dehin Wasantha, an employee at Moratuwa University for more than 25 years and a member of the Sri Lanka Technical Officers Union, and Lakshman Fernando, a full-time worker for the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). They were attacked with clubs and received significant injuries. This is intolerable.

Wasantha and Fernando were exercising their elementary democratic rights to distribute political material and fight for political ideas when they were attacked viciously by thugs. Not just any thugs, but thugs in high places, Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena, the president and secretary of the so-called Peoples Progressive Employees Union branch in Moratuwa University. Will these individuals receive special treatment from the police and the authorities? We have every reason to believe that is possible.

We demand that the culprits be punished, along with those behind the attack. This has become an international episode and we will do our part to expose it.

David Walsh
Joanne Laurier
Writers for the *World Socialist Web Site*

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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 WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact