

Sri Lankan court takes case of violent assault on SEP members

Our reporters
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The Moratuwa Magistrate Court on the outskirts of Colombo on May 20 took up the case of last year's violent assault on Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando.

Wasantha, who is a long-time member of the SEP, is a non-academic worker at the University of Moratuwa, and well known among fellow employees as a socialist fighter for workers' demands. Fernando, also a long-standing member of the SEP, works full time for the party.

Both men were violently attacked with long wooden clubs causing serious injuries last November 30 while campaigning near the rear gate of the University of Moratuwa. Wasantha, Fernando and other SEP members were distributing leaflets for public meetings to be held at Peradeniya University and in Colombo on the Centenary of Trotskyism by SEP (US) National Secretary Joseph Kishore.

Wasantha's two fingers were fractured in the attack which prevented him from working for almost a month. He was treated at the Colombo South Teaching Hospital for several days. Fernando received injuries to his back and neck.

Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena, the president and secretary respectively of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS – People's Progressive Employees Union) branch are accused of carrying out the violent assault. The union is affiliated to the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, which supports President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

As the official complaint to the police explains, SEP campaigners, including Wasantha and Fernando, were threatened, told to end their political activity and leave the vicinity of the university. The accused, armed with long wooden poles, then chased the SEP campaigners in a three-wheeler taxi and attacked Wasantha and

Fernando, grievously injuring them.

Perera and Piyawardena were taken into custody the next day, following Wasantha's official complaint to police, and held until December 2. They were released on strict bail conditions by the Magistrate Court on a brief inquiry. This included 500,000-rupee (\$US1,523) deposits in personal sureties and weekly reporting to the police.

When the case was first listed on January 8, the Moratuwa Magistrate Court judge ordered it to be referred to a mandatory Mediation Board. Wasantha and Fernando refused any settlement at the Mediation Board inquiry when it was held on February 3.

At the latest hearing on May 20, however, the magistrate again ordered the case to be sent to the mediation board to obtain a report. When this process is completed, the case will be heard on September 23.

Lawyers appearing for the injured SEP members submitted medical reports and statements from the relevant hospitals to the court and requested the hearing proceed under the relevant sections of Sri Lanka's penal code. The lawyers also pointed out that there was no settlement during the previous mediation board inquiry.

The country's judicial system is overwhelmed beyond its capacity, however, with numerous cases delayed for extended periods. Under these circumstances, Mediation Boards have been used to ease the burden on the judicial system and to seek settlements between the accused and the complainants.

The SEP (Sri Lanka), along with its sister parties in International Committee of the Fourth International, launched an international campaign to defend Wasantha and Fernando and the democratic right of the SEP to conduct its political work.

Dozens of letters from local and international

supporters were sent to the Sri Lankan attorney general and the Moratuwa University's vice chancellor, calling for rapid action against Perera and Piyawardena. These authorities have not taken any action against the accused. Nor has there been an internal inquiry by Moratuwa University authorities into the violent assault.

The assault on Wasantha by the two PPSS branch leaders was a calculated one. Its purpose was to intimidate and silence him, and stop his political struggle.

Wasantha has continuously exposed the pro-capitalist policies of the union leadership at Non Academic Trade Union Collective (NATUC) meetings at the Moratuwa University, explaining how this was undermining workers' interests. He has also pointed to the essential link between fighting for employees' interests and the necessity for a socialist program.

Union officials have frequently tried to prevent Wasantha from speaking in these meetings, sometimes threatening him with physical violence. The only occasions when Wasantha was allowed to speak was when members insisted that they wanted to hear what he had to say.

Around 13,000 non-academic workers from all 17 Sri Lankan universities are on an indefinite strike, after walking out on May 2. The NATUC was forced to call the strike amid rising anger of its members over the government's savage austerity measures and the rising cost of food and other essentials. As an apologetic letter from the NATUC to Minister of Education Susil Premajayantha admitted, the union could not remain silent "because of the impact of pressure of the members."

The union collective is doing everything possible to limit its demands to rectifying salary anomalies, an eight-year-old claim, and an increase in the current meagre allowance.

When Wasantha tried to speak at a meeting prior to the strike, he was blocked by union officials, declaring, "We don't want to hear you." This blatant censorship is not uncommon but typical of all the unions, who fear any democratic discussion on the socialist perspective Wasantha would have advanced.

While calling striking workers to hold limited protests during the past weeks, information has emerged indicating that the union leadership is holding

talks with some ruling party politicians to "address" their demands.

The union bureaucracy is hostile to Wasantha because of his fearless intervention to defend the democratic rights of fellow employees and the establishment of workers' action committees to fight for their social and democratic rights and unity of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. The anti-democratic attacks on Wasantha confirms the necessity for workers' action committees to take forward this struggle.



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