

Sri Lankan court hearing on violent 2023 assault on SEP members

Our reporters
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The Moratuwa Magistrate Court in Sri Lanka continued hearings on January 19 into the criminal case arising from the November 30, 2023 assault on two members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) near the University of Moratuwa. The proceedings form part of an ongoing case in which the court is examining evidence and testimony relating to the incident.

According to the prosecution, SEP members Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando were attacked after distributing political flyers in the vicinity of the university. The two SEP members were leafleting to publicise SEP public meetings marking the centenary of Trotskyism, addressed by SEP (US) National Secretary Joseph Kishore. The leaflets and meetings challenged the politics of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) government and the trade union bureaucracies.

The prosecution alleges that the assault occurred in a politically charged environment and involved individuals connected to a trade union aligned with the ruling SLPP administration led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The accused in the case, Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena, were identified in court as the president and secretary respectively of the Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya (PPSS) or the People's Progressive Employees Union. They were arrested a day after the incident and later released on bail, subject to conditions including substantial sureties and regular reporting to the police. The case remains before the court, with judicial findings yet to be made.

Defence counsel, during his cross-examination of principal prosecution witness Dehin Wasantha on January 19, described the assault as a dispute between SEP members and university students, alleging that a physical confrontation arose unintentionally during this

intervention. The defence maintains that the accused did not act with prior intent to cause harm.

This version of events was challenged during the proceedings by sworn testimony from Dehin Wasantha, who was also one of the individuals injured and hospitalised in the incident. His evidence focused on the sequence of events preceding and during the assault, as well as his prior interactions with the accused.

Wasantha told the court that political opposition to his views was behind the attack. He testified that the attackers were known to him and that they were aware of his SEP affiliation and political activity at the university. He told the court that this prior familiarity was part of the context in which the incident occurred.

Wasantha also testified that, contrary to the defence narrative, the accused pursued him and another SEP member for a considerable distance before the confrontation occurred. He stated that the pursuit involved the use of a three-wheeler and continued for approximately one kilometre. This aspect of his testimony was presented by the prosecution as inconsistent with the claim that the accused were acting as neutral mediators in a minor dispute.

According to Wasantha's evidence, a violent assault occurred after the accused caught up with the SEP members. He testified that wooden poles were used during the attack and that blows were directed toward the upper body, including the head.

Wasantha explained how he attempted to shield himself and his comrade from potentially deadly blows to the head and stated that, in doing so, he sustained fractures to two fingers. He also described the injuries suffered by Lakshman Fernando, testifying that Fernando was struck multiple times and sustained injuries to his face, back, and neck.

Medical documentation relating to these injuries has been submitted as part of the prosecution case. The defence has not accepted this characterisation of events and continues to dispute the prosecution's interpretation of the evidence.

Wasantha told the court that following the assault, he and Fernando made their way to the Moratuwa Police Station to lodge a complaint. He stated that this occurred despite their injuries and the physical difficulty they experienced in reaching the station.

The SEP has consistently explained in articles and statements that the attack was not an isolated street brawl, but a politically driven attempt to prevent it from organising among university workers and students. It has situated the attack as part of a broader pattern in which trade union bureaucracies and pro-government unions act to defend capitalist austerity, protect ruling-class interests, and suppress rank-and-file, internationalist working-class politics.

Violence by union officials tied to the SLPP, the SEP argues, is an attempt to intimidate workers and block the growth of a socialist and anti-war movement that would challenge the capitalist order and International Monetary Fund austerity measures.

The violent physical attack on SEP members Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando has prompted expressions of concern and solidarity from workers, artists, students, academics, and organisations in several countries.

According to statements released by the SEP, protest letters and appeals have been sent to Sri Lankan authorities, including the vice-chancellor of the University of Moratuwa and Sri Lanka's attorney general, calling for a thorough investigation and accountability for the November 2023 incident.

SEP supporters have emphasised the importance of defending democratic rights, including freedom of political expression and the right to engage in political activity without fear of violence. They have argued that this case has implications extending beyond the immediate parties involved.

While the violent attack on the exercise of democratic rights drew international concern from defenders of civil liberties, the university administration has remained silent about the assault, despite a formal complaint by Wasantha in his capacity as an employee of the university. All the trade unions at the university,

including those affiliated with the current Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power government, have followed suit, exposing their anti-democratic character.

According to information cited by the SEP, the University of Moratuwa has not announced the outcome of any internal inquiry into the events of November 30, 2023. The absence of any publicly available findings raises serious questions about the responsibility of universities to ensure the safety and democratic rights of students and staff on and around campus.

The proceedings in the Moratuwa Magistrate Court continue to examine contested questions of fact, the actions of the accused, and the credibility of the various accounts presented. Further hearings are expected as the prosecution and defence continue to present evidence.

The SEP has stated that while it is pursuing the case through legal channels, it does not view this process in isolation. It emphasises that the defence of democratic rights ultimately requires broader independent political mobilisation by workers and students. At the same time, it has reiterated its demand that those responsible for the assault be held accountable through the judicial process.

For workers and students following the proceedings, the case has raised fundamental questions about political rights, freedom of speech, and the handling of allegations of violence in Sri Lanka.



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