

Sri Lankan court case continues over violent attack on SEP members

Our reporters
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On May 25, the Moratuwa Magistrate's Court in Sri Lanka continued its hearings into the criminal case arising from the violent assault on Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members Dehin Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando near the University of Moratuwa in November 2023.

The two SEP members were attacked while campaigning for public meetings marking the centenary of Trotskyism, which were to be addressed by Joseph Kishore, national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States. The SEP is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

A significant political issue emerged during the cross-examination of Lakshman Fernando on May 25. Fernando, one of the victims of the assault, was questioned by the defence lawyer for those accused of the attack. The lawyer attempted to portray the SEP as a non-governmental organisation (NGO) dependent on foreign funding and suggested that the complaint regarding the assault was motivated by efforts to obtain overseas funds.

Fernando firmly rejected these claims. He told the court that the SEP is a legally registered political party in Sri Lanka that has contested presidential and parliamentary elections, and that it is the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, a world socialist movement fighting to unite workers internationally. He emphasised the SEP's right to be a section of the international socialist movement of the working class.

Responding to questions regarding party finances, Fernando testified that SEP activities are funded through collections and donations made by party members, supporters, political contacts, and through open political campaigns, often conducted door to door.

Fernando was giving evidence as the second witness

in the case concerning the November 2023 attack. He described how he and Wasantha distributed SEP leaflets near the rear gate of the University of Moratuwa as part of the campaign for the meetings. He explained that the accused approached them and ordered them to stop distributing the political material and leave the area.

Fernando testified that, after the SEP members had finished campaigning and were returning home, the attackers followed and assaulted them with wooden poles. He described the attack as life-threatening and explained that both he and Wasantha suffered injuries and were later admitted to hospital for treatment.

He further testified that the violent assault left Wasantha with fractures to the fingers of his left hand, while Fernando sustained neck and body injuries. Fernando identified the accused as those who carried out the attack. Previous court proceedings established that the accused individuals were officials connected to the Moratuwa University branch of Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya, a trade union affiliated with the then-ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The defence also advanced a version of events claiming that the accused had merely intervened in a dispute involving students and SEP members and that no assault had occurred. Fernando rejected these assertions and maintained his account of the attack.

The line of questioning pursued by the defence raises broader political issues bound up with the case.

For decades, establishment parties and leaders of their affiliated trade unions have sought to discredit the SEP by branding it a "foreign-funded" group and associating it with NGOs. Such allegations are political smears aimed at undermining the SEP's intransigent struggle against all forms of capitalist rule and its

uncompromising opposition to the Sri Lankan ruling elite and its attacks on the working class.

This hostility toward NGOs frequently takes the form of anti-democratic attacks on organisations critical of the government, the ruling-class parties, or the trade union apparatus. The SEP has opposed such crackdowns as attacks on democratic rights while maintaining its own independent political criticisms of NGO politics.

The attempt to equate the SEP's international political collaboration with NGO financing is particularly reactionary. The SEP is an internationalist socialist party. Its political collaboration with the ICFI is not a financial or organisational dependency of the type alleged by the defence, but a conscious political association based on shared socialist principles and the perspective of unifying the working class internationally.

The SEP openly fights for the unity of workers across national boundaries. Its perspective is based on the understanding that the root cause of the problems confronting workers and youth in Sri Lanka—war, austerity, unemployment, repression, and social inequality—is the global crisis of capitalism, which can only be resolved through the unified struggle of the international working class.

The party's affiliation with the ICFI is a matter of Marxist political principle. Its international connections are openly acknowledged and flow from its socialist and internationalist program. The *World Socialist Web Site* is the daily Marxist publication of the ICFI. An international campaign launched in response to the attack on Wasantha and Fernando won wide support from workers and young people around the globe.

The smearing of the SEP reveals the hostility of Sri Lanka's ruling elite to the very right of workers and youth to organise internationally on the basis of a socialist perspective. Such arguments mirror the nationalist and anti-democratic methods repeatedly used by sections of the political establishment and trade union bureaucracy to attack socialist opposition.



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