Jaffna fishermen protest against bottom trawling, Tamil nationalists divert anger along communal lines

Navin Dewage, M. Muruganandan
20 August 2026

Fishermen in northern Sri Lanka have recently held protests against commercial fishing vessels from India, whose bottom-trawling operations are inflicting serious damage on their livelihoods.

The fishermen are being squeezed from two sides: by big fishing corporations and by the IMF-dictated austerity measures implemented by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government.

At a press conference on August 8, the Northern Province Fishermen's Federation stated that incursions by Indian trawlers into Sri Lankan waters had spread beyond the Northern Province to southern coastal areas and called for government action to halt the illegal fishing. The Federation and similar organisations, along with Tamil capitalist parties, are seeking to divert legitimate anger within fishing communities away from big business and along communal and nationalist lines.

At a protest on July 29, nearly 300 fishermen on more than 50 fibre boats converged on Kurikattuwan Jetty in northern Sri Lanka. Kurikattuwan Island, 31 kilometres from Jaffna city, is the ferry point for Nagadeepa and Delft in the war-ravaged Jaffna Peninsula.

The demonstration was one of several triggered by catastrophic losses suffered by the island's fishing community. From July 16 to 18 alone, Indian trawlers caused damage to fishing nets amounting to 50 million rupees. The bottom trawlers also cause heavy damage to the seabed and depleted fish stocks.

Bearing black flags, the protesters chanted, "Don't violate our borders." While fishermen are expressing genuine grievances over the loss of their livelihoods, the protest organisers sought to direct their anger against fishermen across the Palk Strait, rather than against the capitalist system and the governments that defend the interests of big business.

A fishermen's representative read a letter to President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, which stated: "It is unacceptable to compromise the livelihood of one section of the country's population for better Indo-Sri Lankan relations." The organisers limited their demands to calling for a ban on Indian trawlers entering Sri Lankan waters, and for unrestricted access to traditional fishing grounds for the local community.

Tamil capitalist politicians, who addressed the protest, sought to divert anger in a nationalist direction, away from the Sri Lankan ruling elite.

All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC) and Tamil National People's Front (TNPF) leader Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam blamed the government for keeping northern fishermen in poverty, but his proposed solution was for the Navy to be deployed "to defend the country's maritime borders."

A WSWS reporter asked how he reconciled this demand with longstanding calls for the complete withdrawal of the military from the North and East, given the Navy's record of violence against northern fishermen. Ponnambalam dismissed the question and reiterated that the Navy must act. The same military which has brutally repressed the Tamil population for decades is presented as their defender when deployed against Indian fishermen.

Annalingam Annarasa, president of the Kayts Fishermen's Federation and leader of the Kayts Divisional Council, dominated by the ACTC, also spoke at the protest. He charged that neither Colombo, New Delhi nor the Tamil Nadu state government had taken adequate action despite years of complaints over the Indian trawler issue.

He issued a so-called ultimatum to the JVP/NPP government, saying that unless the matter was resolved in one month, fishermen would march on the Presidential Secretariat in Colombo. Instead of appealing for support from other workers, fishers and farmers across Sri Lanka and India, he issued a communalist appeal, claiming that Tamils were a "distinct national community" that could not remain silent while their marine resources and livelihoods were taken away.

Another cooperative leader said fishermen did not want "any subsidies," but that resolving the Indian bottom-trawler issue would "secure our living conditions and sea resources." This is a fraud.

When fuel prices shot up at the beginning of the year due to the US-Israeli war against Iran, compounding the IMF-dictated attacks that had already raised utility bills and cancelled subsidies, these same cooperative federations called no protests.

© World Socialist Web Site

Northern fishermen, like their counterparts throughout the country, face deepening poverty, indebtedness, poor-quality housing, as well as inadequate water and electricity.

During the 26-year communal war waged by successive Colombo governments from 1983 against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the northern fishing community faced brutal restrictions and repression. The continuing attacks on living and social conditions are heaped on top of this devastating legacy.

Anandarasa Piyaksmini, from a fishing household, told WSWS reporters at the protest: “Our entire family depends on this livelihood. From Monday until Wednesday night we stay awake preparing the nets and helping load them onto the boats for Thursday’s fishing trip.” She added that these nets were bought by pawning family jewellery and obtaining loans.

She continued: “They went out to sea on Thursday, set the nets and returned. Since they could not go back immediately the next day, they went again on Saturday morning. Then they called us and said, ‘Not a single net is there.’ The moment we heard those words, our hearts were broken.”

A fisherman from Neduntheevu (Delft) explained that they were facing this situation regularly and that it was worsening. Fishermen from Analaitivu, Nainativu (Nagadeepa) and Mannar described similar experiences.

The economic foundations of small-scale fishing are collapsing. Kumareswaran Santhini, the wife of a 60-year-old fisherman, told the WSWS they had managed with the low costs, but the situation had changed: “Now fuel prices have risen enormously. No one can afford to finance a fishing trip alone. That is why four or five people now pool their money to buy nets, purchase fuel and operate a single boat together.” If one net is lost, the burden will fall on those families invested in the boat, pushing them deeper into debt.

Women stand at the centre of this crisis. They prepare nets, arrange loans, repay instalments and struggle to sustain the household budget. As one woman told the WSWS: “Many families do not know how they will repay their loans. We borrow money to repay one debt, then borrow again and pay interest on that as well. Our lives are trapped in this endless cycle.”

The fishing season itself has become a trap. The northeast monsoon months from Karthigai to Panguni offer the best earnings of the year, but also the greatest danger. “One storm is enough for the nets to disappear, the boats to be damaged and everything bought with borrowed money to be destroyed overnight.”

A vast gulf separates these poor families from the officials who dominate the fishermen’s organisations. While local cooperatives include poor fishermen, the upper levels of the federations have close political connections to the Tamil elite and relations with government institutions, including the Ministry of Fisheries and the Navy.

During the 2024 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, JVP/NPP leaders exploited anti-Indian sentiments promoted by Tamil nationalist parties and promised to address the Indian trawler issue to garner votes. The JVP itself has a long history of anti-Indian chauvinism.

The crisis confronting northern fishermen cannot be solved by pitting them against poor fishermen in Tamil Nadu, who face the same crisis. Their catches have been depleted, and they suffer the same damage caused by big fishing trawlers. Ninety percent of Indian fishermen live below the poverty line, while big fishing businesses thrive with the backing of the New Delhi government and state administrations.

The real class divide does not run along the Palk Strait. It runs between the working class and the oppressed, including poor fishermen, on the one hand, and the capitalist interests that exploit them in both countries.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka calls on all fishers and workers across Sri Lanka and India to unite in a powerful common struggle across national borders and communal divisions. We call on Sri Lankan fishers to reject the nationalist and militarist poison spread by the Tamil bourgeois parties and union bureaucrats, which serves to weaken and divide working people.

The SEP calls on fishermen to form their own action committees, independent of the bureaucratic federations, to fight for the following demands:

- Increase subsidies and provide affordable fishing inputs for small fishermen!
- Cancel usurious debts!
- End restrictions imposed on poor fishermen in Sri Lanka and India!
- End exploitation by middlemen and provide proper marketing facilities!

The fight for these demands cannot be separated from the struggle against the Colombo government’s austerity policies, militarism and the capitalist system itself. Workers must turn to the socialist and internationalist program fought for by the SEP.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site