Sri Lankan police harass SEP members campaigning at Jaffna University for release of Bogdan Syrotiuk

Our correspondents
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In a blatant violation of democratic rights, Sri Lankan police interrogated, searched and forcibly took personal details from members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) who were engaged in a political campaign near the entrance of the University of Jaffna on August 19.

The party members had been speaking to students and lecturers and seeking their support for the international campaign to release Bogdan Syrotiuk, the 27-year-old Ukrainian Trotskyist and leading member of the Young Guard of Bolshevik-Leninists who was sentenced on August 10 to 15 years in prison on fraudulent charges of "treason."

The SEP campaign has drawn widespread backing from students at Jaffna University, with many signing the petition for Bogdan's release. The WSWS published statements from Jaffna students on August 22 denouncing the frame-up verdict. The SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality have frequently engaged in political campaigns and discussions with the university community.

At approximately 1:00 p.m., as the SEP campaign team was preparing to leave the area outside the university premises, a police emergency vehicle appeared. Three officers emerged, blocked the comrades, and demanded: "Who are you, why are you here, where are you from?"

The police claimed they had received an "anonymous call" to the 119 emergency line from within Jaffna University alleging that "some people" had forced a female student to provide a voice recording and had taken photos and videos of her. No evidence was produced to substantiate this claim, and no complainant has come forward. The bogus "anonymous complaint" was a transparent pretext to intimidate the SEP members, signal to students that association with the party invites police scrutiny, and to create a climate of fear around political activity on campus.

When Paramu Thirugnana Sampanthar, a member of the SEP's Political Committee, explained that the party team was carrying out a political campaign, the police demanded to know from whom the SEP had obtained permission to campaign. They arrogantly dismissed Sampanthar when he insisted: "We have the democratic right to campaign on the streets."

The officers then forcibly searched the bag of SEP Political Committee member Mahalingam Dilaxshan, seizing leaflets. They also checked his notebook before returning it. They searched the bag of a female comrade, took her mobile phone, and examined its files and data. Police officers also searched another SEP member's three-wheeler vehicle and scrutinised its ownership documents, driving licence, and other papers. They also inspected Dilaxshan's motorcycle documentation.

The officers then recorded the personal details of every SEP member present: full names, National Identity Card (NIC) numbers, addresses, and telephone numbers. When a second female party member stated that she did not have her NIC with her, the police threatened her, declaring that they had the power to arrest her, even though it is not a legal requirement in Sri Lanka to carry an NIC when travelling.

Dismissing Sampanthar's request to take only his details, the police insisted: "This is our duty, and you cannot stop us."

When he was informed about the police harassment of SEP members, Deepal Jayasekara, the general secretary of the SEP, spoke directly to one of the officers over the phone. The police refused to relent and continued recording the personal information of all the comrades.

An officer asserted that they had "every right to check and investigate if anyone called 119." The police

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harassment continued for almost one hour.

Jayasekara has written to the Jaffna University Teachers' Union, the Jaffna University Student Union, and the Jaffna University Non-Academic Employees' Union, calling on them to take a principled stand and publicly denounce the police harassment of the SEP campaign team.

His letter stated: "This police action has dangerous, far-reaching implications for the basic democratic rights of workers and youth, including university teachers, non-academic employees and students. The police can intervene against any protest or class action by any of them over their legitimate rights. Therefore, this police harassment against SEP campaigners should not be taken lightly and must be opposed by all workers, students and anyone who cherishes basic democratic rights."

The incident is the latest in a series of violations of democratic rights involving the police and security forces under the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government.

It is significant that SEP members were targeted while they were campaigning for the freedom of Bogdan, a socialist and anti-war activist. Despite written requests, none of the major newspapers in Sri Lanka reported on Bogdan's imprisonment. Like other corporate media outlets around the world, their silence indicates support for the fascistic actions of the Zelensky regime in Ukraine.

There is a long history of military and police intimidation against the SEP in northern Sri Lanka.

On March 22, 2007, Socialist Equality Party member Nadarajah Wimaleswaran and his friend and SEP sympathiser Sivanathan Mathivathanan disappeared while travelling by motorbike between the northern islands of Punguduthivu and Kayts, near Jaffna. They were last seen passing through a naval checkpoint; evidence strongly implicates the Sri Lankan navy in their abduction. Despite an international campaign, formal complaints to the Human Rights Commission, and court proceedings, the military and successive governments have maintained a wall of silence. Nearly two decades later, no information about their fate has ever been provided.

In 2012, the WSWS reported on the banning of a public meeting by the Ministry of Defence, the illegal detention and questioning of party members by army soldiers, and a subsequent physical attack.

Last month, Kayts police threatened to arrest a WSWS Sri Lankan reporter, after he covered a protest by fishermen in Jaffna.

The Northern and Eastern provinces remain under military occupation, 17 years after the country's bloody communal war ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The military and police maintain a dragnet of surveillance of political parties, youth groups and ordinary Tamil and Muslim people. Journalists, writers and artists, as well as political parties, face frequent attacks on their freedom of expression, including face false accusations of supporting terrorism.

Student leaders affiliated with the JVP/NPP at Jaffna University are also actively working to obstruct the SEP and prevent the discussion of socialist ideas among students. The SEP is the only party that exposes the anti-working-class character of the government.

The government's hostility to the Trotskyist movement's activity among university students was laid bare in January 2025, when the acting vice chancellor of the University of Peradeniya abruptly cancelled an IYSSE lecture titled "How to Fight Against the IMF Austerity Program?"—despite prior approval from the head of the Political Science Department.

The directive demanded that the topic be revised "so as not to appear that the meeting challenges government policies." Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya's office had inquired about the lecture, confirming that the JVP/NPP administration—having betrayed its election promises to renegotiate the austerity measures demanded by the IMF—had actively colluded with university management to suppress the only political tendency advancing a socialist alternative to austerity.

The police action of August 19 marks the continuation of this policy. The government is turning to increasingly dictatorial methods to deal with growing opposition to its IMF-dictated austerity measures.

The SEP urges all workers, students, and everyone who defends basic democratic rights to oppose the police harassment of the SEP.

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