

Sri Lankan police re-arrest relative of SEP member

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Sri Lankan police last month re-arrested Santhiralingam Ilancheliam, who was detained along with Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member Velummailum Kamalthasan in September. The two men were held for eight days without charge before being released after a campaign by the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Ilancheliam was detained in the west coast town of Negombo on October 3, but the SEP only came to know of the arrest after more than a fortnight. Well aware of the impact of the SEP's previous campaign, the Negombo police warned Ilancheliam's relatives not to inform the party, saying it would only make his release more difficult.

Ilancheliam has now been held for more than a month under Sri Lanka's draconian emergency laws, which provide for lengthy detention without charge or trial. The Negombo police brought him before a magistrate on October 31 and obtained a three-week extension. This process that can continue virtually indefinitely.

Since the government plunged the country back to war in mid-2006, thousands of Tamils have been detained and held for weeks or months on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations of helping or being a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Kamalthasan and his brother-in-law Ilancheliam were initially detained while boarding a bus from Negombo to Colombo on September 15 on the grounds of inadequate identification. They were held for eight days despite the fact that the SEP vouched that Kamalthasan was a longstanding party member. The SEP is well known in Sri Lanka for its opposition, not only to the government's communal war, but also to the LTTE's separatist politics and its attacks on Sinhalese

civilians.

Ilancheliam and Kamalthasan were finally freed on September 23. In formally applying for their release from a local magistrate, the police acknowledged that their "further inquiries" had found no evidence of any links to "terrorist" activities. The Negombo police had asked for reports from the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) in Colombo and the Karainagar police station in Jaffna where the two men originally came from.

The re-arrest of Ilancheliam was based on the flimsiest of grounds. Police detained Ilancheliam after arresting another Tamil, Chandiran, after his return from Malaysia. Chandiran told the police that he had stayed with Ilancheliam in 2004 before his departure for Malaysia. The police have not explained why Chandiran was arrested, but hinted that he had LTTE connections.

According to Ilancheliam's family members, Chandiran had stayed with Ilancheliam after arriving in Negombo from Jaffna. Neither Ilancheliam nor his family members know anything about Chandiran's background. Ilancheliam simply had done a favour for a passing acquaintance by providing accommodation for a few days—four years ago!

Since Ilancheliam's re-arrest, the Negombo police have visited his home several times. On October 21, police officers with dogs and equipment ransacked the entire house, claiming to be looking for bombs and explosives. They found no incriminating evidence and, after more than a month, have been unable to file any case against Ilancheliam.

The latest arrest is an ominous warning that the police may be targeting Kamalthasan and the SEP as well. When detaining Ilancheliam on October 3, the police also asked after Kamalthasan who had left for

the northern town of Jaffna.

Shortly after the release of Kamalthasan and Ilancheliyan in September, Negombo senior superintendent of police P.K.S. Vithana wrote to the Inspector General of Police (IGP) explaining that "information has come to light in the course of the investigations that they are not involved in terrorist activity matters". A copy of the letter was also sent to SEP general secretary Wije Dias.

However, soon after Ilancheliyan's re-arrest, Vithana wrote directly to Dias on October 9, adding a more menacing note. While acknowledging that the police had released the two men after finding no evidence against them, the police superintendent wrote: "I wish to inform [you] that further investigations are being carried out regarding this person [Kamalthasan]." In other words, the file is not closed and the police are continuing to pursue Kamalthasan.

There may well be an element of reprisal in the actions of the Negombo police. They were clearly angered that the arbitrary and illegal arrest of Kamalthasan and Ilancheliyan in September was so publicly exposed. As the SEP pointed out at the time, the detention of the two men breached even the harsh regulations set out under the government's emergency powers.

At the same time, the SEP does not underestimate the crisis confronting the government. Having plunged the country back to war, President Mahinda Rajapakse is facing a potential economic catastrophe that is being compounded by the deepening global financial breakdown. The government's huge military spending has helped fuel inflation that is currently running at about 30 percent and has produced widespread political discontent.

The government's response to any opposition, including by striking workers and protesting students and farmers, has been to denounce them for undermining national security and accuse them of "assisting terrorism". The reign of terror against the country's Tamil minority includes not only arbitrary detentions, but the unleashing of death squads operating in collaboration with security forces that have abducted or murdered hundreds of people over the past two years. As the government lurches into a deeper crisis, it will not hesitate to use provocation and violence to try to silence its opponents.

The SEP urges workers and young people to oppose the re-arrest of Ilancheliyan and the ongoing attacks on the democratic rights of Tamils. Only on that basis can working people begin to unify across communal lines and to wage a political struggle for their own independent class interests, in particular to put an end to the country's brutal, 25-year war that has already cost the lives of more than 70,000 people.

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