

Sri Lankan SEP condemns arrest of Frontline Socialist Party leader

By the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) strongly condemns the arrest of Kumar Gunaratnam, a political committee member of the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), and demands his unconditional release. The arrest is another sign that the Sri Lankan government is preparing far broader attacks on the democratic rights of the working class and poor.

Gunaratnam was arrested by police on the November 4 while visiting his ailing mother at her house in Kegalle for an alleged violation of the country's visa regulations. He was brought before the Kegalle magistrate's court, remanded until November 18 and faces possible deportation to Australia.

Gunaratnam, who was an area leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), fled Sri Lanka in 1988 as the then United National Party (UNP) government stepped up its terror campaign in which death squads slaughtered 60,000 JVP members and rural youth. He sought asylum in Australia where he later obtained citizenship.

On returning to Sri Lanka in April 2012, Gunaratnam was seized by police along with another political committee member, one day before the FSP was formally established, and deported to Australia. Gunaratnam came back to Sri Lanka in January and has been active with the FSP.

The Sri Lankan Department of Immigration and Emigration has been seeking Gunaratnam's arrest under a reactionary law prohibiting political activities on a tourist visa. In February, he filed a Fundamental Rights petition seeking a court order to prevent his arrest and deportation. The Supreme Court, however, rejected his claim, declaring that his fundamental rights had not been breached and that he could be liable for deportation.

In reality, "violation of visa regulations" is just a

pretext. Gunaratnam's detention took place against the backdrop of renewed student protests in Sri Lankan universities against education cuts. On 29 October, the police violently attacked a peaceful demonstration of thousands of accountancy students in central Colombo using water cannon, tear gas and clubs. At least 39 students were arrested and later released on bail.

The violence triggered widespread anger. Students have held protests in almost every university. On November 3, around 10,000 rallied in Colombo condemning the police attack and demanding a halt to education cuts. The demonstrations were called by the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), which is controlled by the FSP.

Speaking in the parliament on November 3, Higher Education Minister Lakshman Kiriella blamed "outside forces" for instigating the protests and accused opposition political forces of taking advantage of the situation. The following day Gunaratnam was arrested.

While the immediate targets are the FSP and IUSF, Kiriella's reference to "outside forces" has a more sinister meaning. The government, which is nervous about growing social tensions, will use to same rhetoric to justify the broader suppression of political opposition and resistance by the working class and poor.

The continuous student protests are a sign of seething popular discontent and the struggles of workers to come. Backed by Washington, President Maithripala Sirisena exploited the widespread hostility to Mahinda Rajapakse to oust him in the January presidential election and install a UNP-led government to implement IMF's austerity agenda.

Already, the attacks on living standards are provoking resistance by working people.

* In March, eight plantation workers at Deeside

estate in Maskeliya in central hill district were arrested on false charges after initiating a strike against increased workloads.

* In May, police fired tear gas at a protest opposite the Jaffna courts against the rape and murder of a school girl in Jaffna. It expressed the far broader anger over the continued military occupation of the island's north and east.

* In the same month, police used similar methods against the residents of Meetotalmulla, a Colombo suburb, protesting against a hazardous garbage dumping site.

* In October, the police used tear gas against demonstrating farmers at Bandagiriya near Hambantota, who were demanding clean drinking water. Twelve villagers were arrested and released on bail.

Social unrest will only increase as the government implements the IMF's demands to halve the budget deficit from 6.8 percent of the GDP to 3.5 percent by 2018. While cutting social spending, it is expanding the state repressive machine, allocating an unprecedented defense budget of 306 billion rupees and another 60 billion rupees for the police.

While calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Gunaratnam, the SEP gives no political support to him or his pseudo-left FSP, which split from the JVP in 2012. The JVP had become widely discredited, especially among young people, for its participation in the coalition government of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga and its support for Rajapakse's renewed war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The FSP, however, has no fundamental differences with the JVP's nationalist politics and is seeking to integrate itself into the Colombo political establishment. In the January presidential election, the FSP indirectly supported the US-sponsored regime-change operation that brought Sirisena to power, declaring the "priority" was to defeat "the Rajapakse dictatorship."

The FSP is seeking to form Greek-style Syriza formation, lining up with pseudo-left groups such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP) to divert growing discontent over the government's austerity policies into a parliamentary dead-end and prop up capitalist rule. The

IUSF, in line with the FSP, opposes students turning to the working class and fighting for socialist policies to defend public education.

The FSP's defence of Gunaratnam is entirely within the framework of the Sri Lanka legal system. Leading FSP member Pubudu Jagoda declared: "We have no objection in subjecting Gunaratnam to domestic law, which should be amended as suggested in parliament and provided that he is considered as a Sri Lankan citizen."

The SEP warned last November: "Sirisena and the UNP denounce the [Rajapakse] government's autocratic methods but would be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in imposing the IMF's austerity dictates on the working class." A year later that warning has been thoroughly vindicated.

The arrest of Gunaratnam is another sign of the state repression that is being prepared. The SEP calls on workers and youth to draw the political lessons, to break from every section of the capitalist class and to fight for a workers' and peasants' government on the basis of socialist policies as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally. We urge workers and youth to study our program and to join and build the SEP and its International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) as the necessary revolutionary leadership for the struggles ahead.

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