

Sri Lanka SEP holds picket in Jaffna to free Maruti Suzuki workers

By our correspondents
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Today the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are holding a picket and a public meeting in Jaffna, Sri Lanka as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) campaign to demand the release of the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in India.

The picket will be held at 3:30 p.m. in front of Jaffna central bus terminal and the meeting will start at 5 p.m. at Weerasingham Hall.

Jaffna on the northern tip of the island of Sri Lanka, just across the narrow Palk Strait from India, was devastated during the government's brutal war against the Tamil population that ended in 2009.

SEP and IYSSE supporters in Jaffna have campaigned among workers, students and oppressed masses to build support for the picket and meeting. Campaigners distributed thousands of copies of the ICFI statement defending the victimised workers. They spoke to students in Jaffna University, workers from the Jaffna district secretariat, education department and other workplaces and also unemployed graduates who were carrying out a sit-down protest demanding jobs.

Jaffna University students enthusiastically supported the ICFI campaign and asked about the history of Maruti Suzuki workers' struggle. During the campaign Jaffna University Student Union leader Anujan and two union members tried to interfere and disrupt the campaign. SEP and IYSSE campaigners insisted on the urgent need to defend Indian workers and as well their own right to discuss the issue with students. Expressing their hostility to democratic rights and their prostration before university authorities, the student union leaders said, "We can't allow any political campaign inside our university without permission of the administration."

When the student union leaders' attempts to block the SEP/IYSSE failed to get any support from students, they called security guards to order the campaigners off the campus. The anti-democratic move by the Jaffna University Student Union leaders is bound up with their political collaboration with the Tamil bourgeois parties, mainly Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which openly supports the pro-US Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government. Student Union leader Anujan played a particularly despicable role by blocking the students' struggle against the police killing of two students last year.

Despite the disruption, most students expressed their support for the Indian autoworkers. A female third-year art student said, "It is very important to fight for the release of the Maruti Suzuki workers in India. The media and none of the political parties have informed us about this case. We've only learned about it through your campaign. I agree that capitalists are attacking workers all over the world. We are very interested in holding discussions among students on this type of question. But the student union says every discussion must be organised through them. That is the problem. We will sign the online petition to demand the release of the Maruti Suzuki workers."

A group of students from the Management Faculty said, "We support your campaign. The punishment on Maruti Suzuki workers is an injustice. We condemn this attack on workers. Workers and students all over the world must intervene and stop it.

"We agree, as you said, that the imperialists are preparing a third world war that would kill millions if it starts. We already have severe hardship and damage from the racist war by the Sri Lankan government. The deployment of US warships to the Korean Peninsula is very dangerous but there is no discussion or seminar on

that issue in our university.”

One unemployed graduate who was participating in the unemployment protest said, “We have got a lot of experience through our struggles. We can understand the Maruti Suzuki workers’ struggle and we have to support them, and they should also support us. We met Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe, Northern Province Chief Minister Vickneswaran and the Northern Province Governor’s Secretary Ilankovan to discuss our employment problem. We also sent a letter to the president but nobody cares about our problems.

“When we met the prime minister, he said he would look for vacancies in several departments and solve our problem in three weeks. But it has been over five weeks and we have received no reply.”

The protesters said they were treated similarly by Chief Minister Vickneswaran. “He has no interest helping us and avoids us by claiming he is too busy. When we met the governor’s secretary Ilankovan, he said, ‘The government has no money. The IMF [International Monetary Fund], he said, has ordered the government to reduce the number of government employees. So, there is no possibility for employment in the government service.’

“We are frustrated with all political leaders and with the government. They have all cheated us and we are very frustrated. We support the campaign to release the Maruti Suzuki workers. We agree workers must unite all over the world to win their rights. Through our struggle of more than 50 days we understand all about the political parties’ treachery. This has led us to the conclusion that we have to fight against capitalism.”

Another unemployed graduate condemned the Jaffna university student union leaders’ effort to stop the campaign to free the Indian autoworkers. “Your work is very important. You support our struggle and the Maruti Suzuki workers and fight to unite workers all over the world. But I don’t know why this student leader can’t understand your campaign.”

V. Moorthy from the education department said, “These life sentences for the Maruti Suzuki workers are crude. We can’t accept this injustice. All workers must unite and fight to release them. If anybody is working honestly and fighting for his rights, he will be victimised by the government and bureaucrats. I know this through my own experiences. When working as a school principal in Mullaitivu district, I was victimised

under the [former] Rajapaksa government because I was working honestly and not for their political needs. I was transferred to Jaffna’s islands. I opposed that transfer and because of that they put me in the Jaffna education department. Workers who fight for their rights are victimised all over the world. So, all over the world, workers must unite to defeat this attack”

Sarvanatha, a journalist, said, “I know about the Maruti Suzuki workers’ struggle because I saw the film *The Factory*, which featured it. But many people don’t know about that struggle. I think your campaign is very important in informing people.”

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