

Sri Lankan students demand release of framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers

By our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members in Sri Lanka won strong support last week from Kelaniya University students and non-academic workers for the international campaign to free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in India.

On March 18, a court in the northern Indian state of Haryana sentenced 13 Maruti Suzuki workers to lifetime prison sentences on trumped-up murder charges. The decision was aimed at intimidating all Indian workers opposed to low wages, inhumane working conditions and attacks on democratic rights. The ruling was the outcome of a conspiracy involving the Indian and Haryana governments, Maruti Suzuki, the police and the judiciary.

Kelaniya University non-academic worker supports international campaign

At the Kelaniya campus, SEP and IYSSE campaigners distributed over 1,000 copies of statements by the International Committee of Fourth International (ICFI) and SEP. Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) supporters unsuccessfully attempted to disrupt the campaign, falsely claiming that “party politics” were not allowed on campus.

The IUSF is controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), which gave tacit support to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government when it came to office. Now that Colombo, in line with International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures, is stepping up its attacks on free education, the IUSF claims that students can stop the privatisation of public education by pressuring the government.

Despite the IUSF’s attempts to disrupt the SEP/IYSSE campaign, more than 60 students and several non-academic workers signed the ICFI’s online petition calling for release of the Maruti Suzuki

workers.

More than a dozen students also agreed to have further discussions with the SEP on its anti-war perspective and its internationalist program to fight the social austerity attacks in Sri Lanka.

Bandara, an arts graduate, said: “This is the first time I’ve witnessed an international campaign like this on workers’ issues. This sort of international program is necessary. It is clear that the reason workers face this type of attack is because of the profit interests of international capital.”

Bandara said he was unemployed and it was difficult to find work. “Many youth have to work on a contract basis and have no freedom,” he said. “It’s hard to manage your life with this sort of job because of the low wages and rising cost of living. Workers need a political program, as you said, but the established parties fail to provide policies which represent the workers.”

Shanika, a third-year humanities student, condemned the jailing of the autoworkers. “Workers must have the right to fight for decent working conditions,” she said. “I signed the online petition because I stand for that right.”

Shanika commented: “The conditions facing Maruti Suzuki workers are similar to those in Sri Lanka and all over the world. And it is not only the workers. Anyone who fights for their rights is treated in a similar way. It’s interesting that workers from other countries have signed this petition and it’s a good forward step for the unity of the working class in every country.”

Madushan, a final-year arts student, expressed his solidarity with the ICFI campaign. “Workers in every country face similar harsh attacks on their living and working conditions,” he said. “Unstable employment and low wages are common issues confronting workers

everywhere.”

Madushan pointed out that government moves to privatise public education were part of these attacks and added: “But the leaderships of workers and students organisations have joined with the capitalist political parties. This is the main problem workers and students face.

“As you have explained, it is vital to be independent from the capitalist parties in order to defend the social and democratic rights of workers and students.”

Kelaniya University students signing online petition

Several students criticised the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the FSP, a breakaway from the JVP. A group of female students said these organisations were the same as other capitalist parties and rejected claims it was possible to pressure the government to drop its plans to privatise public education.

“Although we campaigned continuously against the government’s assault on public education this has not stopped the privatisation program,” one student said. “Instead, the government has intensified these attacks.”

These students also criticised the lack of basic facilities—lecture halls, hostels, libraries, computer centres and teachers. “The hostels are crowded with four beds to a room and in the female hostels there are no facilities for our studies,” a student added.

Two students who signed the ICFI petition condemned the effort of IUSF activists to stop the SEP/IYSSE campaign.

“It’s wrong and unjust that they try and disrupt the SEP campaign,” one said. “Every political party has an equal right to fight for their ideas of choice. It’s a lie that there are no party politics on the universities. There is no democracy in the students’ unions. The student unions leaders are always supporters of the JVP or FSP. We have reservations about their policies but we have no opportunity to talk about it. We’d like to further study the SEP’s program.”

A group of non-academic workers said the imprisonment of the Maruti Suzuki workers was “unjust” and signed the online petition. “The workers have the right to fight for decent working conditions and pay,” one commented.

“The Sri Lankan government also uses the judiciary to suppress workers’ struggles. We saw this in the port and telecom strikes. We thought the conditions of

working people would improve under this government but the situation has become worse. The government is using dictatorial measures to suppress workers.

“There is no difference between the previous Mahinda Rajapakse government and this one. In fact, the attacks on the working class have intensified. The international unity of the working class is a must in order to fight against these assaults.”

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