

Sri Lankan SEP holds “Free Assange” rally and public meeting in Hatton

By our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful rally and public meeting in defence of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning at Hatton on August 11. The central province working-class city is surrounded by major tea plantations.

The rally, which involved plantation workers, SEP members and supporters, was held in the morning outside Hatton’s main bus terminal. Participants held banners and placards and chanted slogans in Sinhala and Tamil demanding freedom for Assange and Manning. Despite heavy rain, the hour-long demonstration gathered the support of many workers who had come to Hatton for their weekly shopping and other needs.

Several media organisations covered the event. SEP political committee members W.A. Sunil and M. Thevarajah addressed the media in Sinhala and Tamil respectively. The Facebook news page of *Malayagakuruvi* (Upcountry bird), a Tamil-language publication, the *Global Tamil News* web site and *Metro News* (a supplement of leading Tamil daily *Virakesari*) published reports. Two television channels, UTV and Dan TV, broadcast footage of the protest.

M. Thevarajah chaired the SEP’s afternoon public meeting at the CWF Hall, outlining the grave situation facing Assange and explaining growing global geopolitical tensions, including the Indian government’s military lock-down in Kashmir and US war threats against Iran. Thevarajah told the meeting that the persecution of Assange was part of the escalating attacks on freedom of expression by ruling classes and their governments in every country.

IYSSE member Dinesh Heymaal saluted the determination of Assange and Manning, praising their

courageous defiance of the world’s most powerful imperialist powers and urging young people to support the Global Defence Committee initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS).

W.A. Sunil, who delivered the main report, noted the ongoing refusals of the Sri Lankan media, pseudo-left organisations and the trade unions to oppose the persecution of Assange. “Despite this, the WSWS is doing everything at its disposal to break this silence,” he said, and reviewed the global campaign being conducted by the Trotskyist movement and the support it was winning from concerned workers, youth, journalists and intellectuals.

Sunil explained how Assange has been targeted by a vicious international frame-up and why the international working class must fight for his freedom. The ruling elites, he said, have not resolved any of the economic issues that produced the global financial crisis and, in the face of a growing movement of the international working class fighting social austerity, are moving towards dictatorial forms of rule.

The speaker reviewed the political situation in Sri Lanka and the recent betrayal of the plantation workers’ struggle for a wage increase by the trade unions. He said that the Sri Lankan political establishment had used the Easter Sunday bombings to impose a state of emergency and other anti-democratic measures as part of its shift towards the establishment of a police state (see: “After terrorist bombings, Sri Lankan government imposes draconian national emergency”).

Sunil pointed to the escalating attacks on freedom of expression in Sri Lanka and the incarceration of Shakthika Sathkumara, following bogus accusations against the award-winning writer by Buddhist extremist groups. Sathkumara was recently released on harsh bail

conditions after spending four months in jail on remand.

Sunil stressed that the defence of Assange and Manning is a central issue for the international working class. The two courageous individuals are class war prisoners, victims of the global assault on basic democratic rights by the ruling elites.

“There is vast opposition against this witch-hunt and what we need to do is politically guide this opposition. This fight must be based on the struggle for international socialism,” Sunil said, and urged all those in attendance to actively support the international campaign to defend Assange and Manning.

WSWS reporters spoke with several workers and youths in the lead up to, and after, the bus station demonstration and public meeting.

Manikkam, a retired teacher, watched the SEP demonstration and attended the public meeting. “These people [Assange and Manning] have served the people. The attacks on them reveal that governments are not there to protect commoners like us. Is it democratic to persecute people who have courageously revealed the truth and defend freedom for journalism? We must fight for them.”

Vijaya, a young worker met during the campaign, was concerned that Assange could be extradited to the US where he would face even more brutal conditions. “What Assange did was totally correct. He revealed the real face of US imperialism, which pretends to be democratic,” he said. “I support all the efforts to free him.”

Roshan, 34, a power worker, who was met during the campaign and attended the public meeting, said, “After considering all the [meeting] speeches I can relate these issues to my workplace. The labour courts are shams. When you say WikiLeaks revealed classified government information to the public, it reminds me of the fact that the Sri Lankan government had prior knowledge of Easter Sunday bombings. Ultimately it is the working class that has to suffer.”

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