Sri Lankan SEP defends Tamil plantation workers

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20 August 1998

The Sri Lanka police have carried out sweeping arrests of Tamil-speaking tea plantation workers and youths following a bomb explosion near the town of Hatton on August 8. A train with empty fuel tanks and passenger compartments traveling to Colombo, some 180 kilometers away, was heavily damaged by the blast, and the engine driver and his assistant were hospitalized.

Just two and a half hours later, around 11 p.m., over 100 policemen cordoned off the eastern division of the Strathdon plantation and ordered "suspected youths" to gather at a Hindu temple premises. Police arrested 22 youths and took them to a police station by truck. Arrests have also taken place in nearby areas. According to eyewitnesses, the police broke open the doors of workers' lodgings to look for suspects.

On the next day, August 9, 50 policemen returned to the plantation with police dogs and again began searching workers' homes. The officers abused men and women workers and ransacked household belongings, according to residents who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site.*

Anyone who had pieces of wire, a radio or a television in their houses was taken into custody. Among those arrested were two 13- and 15-year-old students. One of the youth had previously been detained for many months two years ago. He was only released after a campaign by the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party.

Workers on the tea plantation launched a three-day protest strike and gathered at the Hatton police station to demand the release of the youths. "We oppose the arrest of our innocent people. We know about the previous campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Party to get our youths released. We will participate in the action committee called by the SEP to protect our democratic rights," the protesting workers told the WSWS. It is now over a week since the arrested youths were taken into custody.

The official unions have abandoned the workers. Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader and the Peoples Alliance government minister S. Thondaman told the press that his union is "not involved in any strike action" against the arrests. One of the arrested youths is a district leader of another estate union—the National Union of Workers. But the leadership of that union has kept silent on the police round-up.

The police accuse the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the mine blast, but most of the workers who spoke to *WSWS* suspect that some other forces, including possibly the police, may be responsible. These suspicions are warranted considering the recent developments in the country. About two months ago when a bomb attack took place at a tea factory near Hatton, the police took nine Tamil youths into custody, including a supporter of the SEP. The manager of the factory had first reported that the attackers spoke Sinhala fluently, but this information was suppressed.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its Sri Lankan section have launched a campaign to demand the release of those arrested. Thus far the Defence Ministry and the police have keep silent about the protest letters they have received. The police have barred SEP representatives from meeting with the detainees, claiming "the suspects are still under interrogation."

The Peoples Alliance regime and the Sri Lankan ruling class are carrying out these provocations against Tamil-speaking plantation workers and the racist war against the Tamil people in the North and East, to further divide and disorient the working class. Just last

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February, Sinhala and Tamil-speaking plantation workers joined together in a powerful strike by 600,000 workers against the regime and the plantation owners.

The PA government has now established emergency rule throughout the country and has indefinitely postponed the Provincial Council elections. The claim that plantation workers are involved in terrorist actions is being used to justify further attacks on the democratic rights of the Tamil people and the working class as a whole.

The Sri Lankan SEP has launched a campaign to secure the release of the Tamil youths arrested in this most recent incident. At the same time it is intensifying its campaign to free the three Tamil SEP members who were arrested by the LTTE in the northern district of Kilinochchi because of their determined stand to unite Tamil and Sinhalese working people against the PA regime, on the basis of a international socialist perspective.

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