

Tea plantation workers face frame up in Sri Lanka

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Twenty-seven tea plantation workers in Uva province in Sri Lanka have been imprisoned on false charges that they set fire to the residence of an estate manager during a strike last October. On November 17 a magistrate in Badulla, some 250 kilometers away from Colombo, ordered the workers to remain in jail an additional week. The workers have already been remanded in jail for three weeks since their arrest on October 27, the day after the fire was set.

The detained are labourers at the Galaboda division of Passara group--situated 16 kilometers from Badulla. The estate is owned by Hapugastenna Plantations, a large tea company that took over the plantation after its privatisation by the Peoples Alliance government.

The 27 workers were singled out by management personnel during an identification parade November 10. A list of their names was prepared together by management and the police.

Among those arrested are three women workers, three local trade union leaders and a school student. One union leader, who was shot in both of legs by police, is in hospital under police custody. In addition, the day before the outbreak of the fire, a reporter from a well-known Tamil daily newspaper, *Virakesari*, and his photographer were arrested as they gathered details from striking workers. They have also been held for weeks.

The arrests were carried out to intimidate and terrorize plantation workers who have been engaged in a series of protests and strikes since September. More than 1,700 workers, both Tamil- and Sinhala-speaking, struck to remove an estate manager who used harassment and racial discrimination to oppress them. The workers also demanded the payment of festival pay on time and the accurate recording of the number of days they work and the amount of tea they pluck. It was

a common practice for workers who pluck 25 kg of tea leaves a day to be paid for only 20 kg by the estate supervisor.

Management rejected these demands and the strike became increasingly militant. Union leaders had tried to persuade workers to end the strike but failed. The determination of the workers to win their demands began to attract the support of workers from other estates and forced union officials to call two additional strikes, involving another 60,000 workers. It was at this point that management, with the help of the police, staged a provocation in order to crush the workers' struggle.

On the night of October 25 the workers' 'line rooms' (workers quarters built by British planters during their colonial rule) were stoned by an unknown group. The workers immediately gathered to protect themselves and captured one Sinhala person, known as the manager's 'bodyguard,' from among the group of provocateurs. They handed him over to police. But the police, after talking with the culprit, let him free. Soon afterwards the workers identified the same person with another notorious thug in the company of the police.

It was not too long after this that workers heard a big explosion from the direction of the manager's residence, and saw a fire breaking out in the building. When the estate trade union leader went to police on duty to inquire what was taking place the police shot him in the legs. The following day police arrested the 27 workers.

Workers reject the false charges

The workers vehemently rejected the charge that they set fire to the manager's house. They told the *World*

Socialist Web Site that the fire was deliberately set as part of the manager's plan to round up striking workers. They told the WSWS that the manager moved truckloads of furniture from his residence to the estate's storehouse before the fire broke out. Workers told the WSWS, 'The arrest of the journalists of the Tamil daily the day before was a part of the deliberate attempt to cover up the real culprits.'

The day after the fire the deputy inspector general visited the estate and told workers that no action would be taken against them and that they should remain calm. Behind the scenes, however, management and the police prepared a list of workers to be arrested. The police then went to the workers' line rooms with the local trade union leader to identify the workers on the list. All were then arrested, including the trade union leader.

The workers were taken to the Badulla police station at 6 p.m. They were beaten mercilessly before police took their statements and held until 3 a.m. the next morning. The workers were then remanded for two weeks.

Supporters of the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party took pictures of the wounded trade union official in the Badulla hospital. He was chained to the bed and police were guarding the ward. The union official, his legs bandaged, was later transferred to a prison. The rank-and-file workers continued to be brutalized in prison. Only their relatives were permitted to see them.

The majority of workers belong to the Ceylon Workers Congress-- part of People's Alliance government--and its principal leader, S. Thondaman, is a cabinet minister. While abandoning the victimized workers, the CWC leaders were engaged in discussions with management and agreed to persuade the workers to return to work on November 4. They also agreed to receive the festival advance in December, three months after the traditional Hindu festival of Deepavali. The union leaders were conspicuously silent on the framed-up and imprisoned workers.

The plantation owners rewarded the estate manager for his repressive methods by promoting him to the post of senior manager in charge of four company estates.

Plantation workers are among the poorest paid in Sri Lanka. Their average pay per day is around 100 rupees (US\$1.50). Their living quarters are comprised of a small verandah, a small room and a kitchen, barely

suitable for living. Usually more than one family lives in these line rooms.

During the strike the estate manager stopped the supply of running water to the line rooms. The estate's hospital has only an outpatient treatment section, having previously closed down the hospital wards. Children have to walk over two miles to the nearest school. Youth unemployment in plantation areas is the highest in the country.

Six hundred thousand plantation workers throughout Sri Lanka went on strike in February this year to demand a salary increase, a struggle that was betrayed by the union leadership. But even after they called off the strike hundreds of thousands of workers continued the walkout. Management and the government have launched this frame-up of the tea plantation workers because the trade union bureaucracy is beginning to lose its grip on the workers.

The Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party, which is demanding the release of the imprisoned workers, is fighting for a new perspective for the working class based on international socialism.

See Also:

Sri Lankan SEP defends Tamil plantation workers
[20 August 1998]

Unions call off strike by plantation workers in Sri Lanka

[17 February 1998]



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