Sri Lankan plantation workers expose frame-up by estate management

Socialist Equality Party launch campaign in their defence

Vijitha Silva
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In early February a team from the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka visited a group of plantation workers held in custody at the Badulla prison. Among the SEP delegation were M. Aravindan, a Central Committee member of the SEP and president of the SEP union--Plantation and Industrial Workers Union (PIWU)--and attorney Ajith Ratnayake, a legal representative for the SEP and PIWU.

These workers belong to the Galaboda division of the Passara group of estates owned by the Hapugastanna Plantation Company. They were among the group of workers arrested by the police on the trumped-up charges of setting fire to the estate manager's bungalow on October 25. The workers were striking against wage cuts and repressive measures imposed upon them as a result of the privatisation of the plantation sector.

On the evening of October 27 a police team came to the estate and asked workers to gather near the estate boutique. The police then arrested 25 workers according to a list they had prepared beforehand with the help of the estate management.

On the night of October 25, Sandanam Anthonysamy, a branch leader of the Ceylon Workers Union (CWC--the main plantation workers union in Sri Lanka), was shot in both legs by a police party posted at the estate when he approached them to inquire about what was taking place. He was taken into police custody, and chained to a bed in a Badulla hospital. After the October 27 incident another two workers were arrested. The police are accusing all of them of setting fire to the estate manager's bungalow. Fifteen workers remain in custody and others have been released on bail after a lengthy period of detention. Anthonysamy, still not fully recovered from his injuries from the police shooting, is also in custody.

Workers recounted to the SEP team: "The Badulla police arrested us on October 27, 1998. They ordered us to remain at the estate boutique until the investigations were finished. Later we were brought to the police station and assaulted without any questioning.

"As a result of the assault by the police Padmanadan was unable to urinate for two weeks. He fainted, vomited and was unable to take meals. None of us were provided meals for the first night. We were brought to the Badulla prison at 2 a.m. the next morning."

"At the police station our signatures were forcibly taken to sign a document prepared in Sinhala. We did not know the contents of that document." (The plantation workers are Tamil speaking.) "No charges have been levelled against us, and we see no reason why we should not be released."

The SEP delegation inquired about the conditions faced by the workers in custody and discussed the political campaign launched by the SEP and PIWU on their behalf. A petition directed to the Defence Secretary and demanding the unconditional release of all the workers in custody is being circulated among the plantation workers, other workers and the oppressed. As a part of this campaign a public meeting was also held in Passara on February 7.

Welayudan Markandan described to the visiting SEP team his experience while in the custody: "I have not been provided employment at the estate, so I am running a small boutique there to make a living for my family. My wife and I were arrested because I provided goods to the workers of the estate on credit, during the strike. She was bailed out after she forwarded a medical certificate, but I was not granted bail."

Ramasamy Rajaratnam, 23, pointed out the connection between this latest frame-up and the attacks taking place on the basic rights of workers: "The estate management cut the number of our working days. Even though we worked 25 days per month, they recorded it as 20 days. In this way we lost many days of wages as we are daily paid workers. There is no medicine at the hospital of our estate. No vehicles are provided by management for workers to transport a patient, even in an emergency, to the Passara hospital. So we have to spend Rs. 300 for a private vehicle in such a case. But the management grants only Rs. 100 for that. When we took strike action to demand these basic things be corrected the management organised a frame-up against us and put us in jail."

An advanced level student at Passara Tamil School, Govindan Wardharaja, 20, is also among those in custody. He said: "I am preparing for the Advanced Level Exam to be held next August. I was arrested on my way back home from a private tuition class. Even though I told them that I was preparing for the exam I have not been granted bail. No charge has been levelled against me, but I am still in custody. I cannot understand why."

Other workers still in the custody are: CWC branch leader Sandanam Anthonysamy, Arunasalam Ramayya Piyasena, Kandasamy Udaya Suriyan, Murugesu Kadiravel, Asirwadan Venandarajah, Arumugam Ragu, Periyasamy Thevarajah, Anthony Muththu Lawrence, Sansundaram Stevenrajah , Arunasalam

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Mahalingam, Perumal Puwalendran and Mugan Perumal.

An SEP team also visited the Galaboda estate and discussed with workers who had been bailed out. Muththaiah Kamalakumar, 29, who had been bailed out on January 14, said: "Our rights have been denied to us after the estates were handed over to the companies. We were arrested because we launched a strike against these measures. Although we were released from detention we are not provided work in the estate."

Mylvaganan Walarmathi, 31, a mother of three who also was bailed out the same day, described how management has continued the witch-hunt against the workers: "Although we were bailed out the estate company does not allow us to engage in our jobs. We struck for three months, then we spent another three months in the jail. My three children are going to school, but we have no way to earn wages, even for our daily meals. We have to report to the police station every Sunday [according to the rulings of the court]."

Workers expressed their appreciation for the initiative taken by the SEP in their defence. Arulalandan Jesudasan, 25, said: "The SEP was in the forefront of the campaign for our release. It is on the basis of SEP principles that the workers will be released."

Kandyya Periyasamy, 38, another worker bailed out on January 7, pledged his backing for the SEP campaign: "The SEP comrades faced some difficulties in their efforts to secure our release. We give our support to your efforts every way we can."

Arumugan Padmanadan, 29, reported that police kicked him with their boots the day they were arrested, and that he still suffers pain as a result of that assault.

The workers vehemently reject the accusation that they set fire to the manager's bungalow. According to them, on the night of October 25 their line rooms 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 go 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.

Workers believe that the fire was deliberately set as part of the manager's plot to round up striking workers. They reported that the manager moved truckloads of furniture from his residence to the estate's storehouse before the fire broke out.

Workers added that the arrest of Tamil journalists the day before the arrests was part of management's "deliberate attempt to cover up the real culprits".

Mohammed Samsudin Nawusad, a local journalist for the leading Tamil daily *Veerakesari*, spoke to a *WSWS* reporter who visited him at his residence in Badulla. He said that he and S. Lechchamanan, a local professional photographer, were arrested by Lunugala police in the Solans estate owned by the Hapugastanna Plantations, the same company which owns the Passara group, at about 6:30 p.m. last October 24 while travelling in a vehicle. They were arrested on the grounds of entering the estate without permission. The vehicle and Nawusad's cellular phone were also taken into police custody.

On the following day their statements were recorded by Lunugala police, and at about 4:00 p.m. they was brought before the Badulla magistrate, Mr. M.C.B.S. Morayas, at his home. Attorney Sujeewa Jayasinghe appeared for them. The magistrate alleged that it had been reported that Nawusad's vehicle was used to transport weapons so they could not be released on bail. He ordered them to be detained until November 9.

On November 9, when Nawusad appeared before the same judge at the Passara Circuit Courts, defence attorney Mr. Chula Bandara PC challenged the weapons transportation charges raised by the judge. The attorney further complained that the judge had personally intervened in the case and that Judge Padmini Ranawaka Gunathilake, the wife of Ranjith Gunathilake, the manager of the Passara group, had met with Judge Morayas and may have discussed the case. Bandara further indicated that he would complain to the Judiciary Service Commission about these issues and request a change of judge.

Judge Marayas acknowledged that he knew Mrs. Gunathilake and had met with her, but argued that these personal relations would not interfere in the case. However the judge did rule that Nawusad and Lechchamanan be released on bail.

But when Nawusad was leaving the court premises after being bailed out he was again arrested by police. This time he was charged with involvement in setting fire to the estate manager's bungalow on the night of October 25! The courts later extended his detention several times.

On January 20, 1999 Nawusad was produced in the Badulla High Courts. Mr. Marshal Perera, the attorney appearing for him, said that there was no possibility that he could have participated in setting fire to the bungalow as he was in police custody at the time. Confronted with this obvious contradiction, state attorney Mr. Sumudu Wickramaarachchi raised no objection to granting him bail. Nawusad is still facing charges in two cases.

Nawusad said that the real reason for his arrest and detention was that he had written reports for the *Veerakesari* newspaper about the workers strike in Passara. Workers have charged that the police arrested Nawusad in an attempt to prevent exposure of management's plot to frame up the workers for setting the fire at the manager's bungalow.

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