

Young Tamil plantation workers arrested on false bombing charges

Parents speak out against their detention and torture

S. Sri Haran
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP-Sri Lanka) will mount a picket Sunday, May 16 in the Hatton area, Central Province, to demand the unconditional release of all political prisoners in the highland plantation region.

Six Tamil youths accused of the May 31, 1998 bombing of a tea factory at the Shannon Estate in Hatton, as well as three teachers arrested as LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) suspects, continue to be held under detention without trial. No charges have been laid against any of the detainees; all have been abused and tortured by police. (The brutal treatment to which three of the youths were subjected has been detailed in an earlier *WSWS* report: "Tamil plantation youth recount brutal torture by Sri Lankan police")

The police's brutal treatment of the detainees--there exists no evidence against them except that which the police have beaten out of them--as well as statements by their parents and other relatives demonstrate not only that the accusations against the nine are without foundation; the detainees are the victims of a state frame-up.

Two of the three arrested teachers, Sambandan Thiruwandan and Sivam Sivanandaraja, come from the Hatton area. They were arrested in October, apparently as the result of information extracted through police abuse and violence from Sambandan Ranjimalar, Sambandan Thiruwandan's sister. Sambandan Ranjimalar is a teacher at Alanganie Vinayagar Tamil School in Trincomalee, a majority Tamil port city situated in the Eastern Province, far from the highland plantation area.

According to a relative of detainee Sambandan

Thiruwandan, who is a mathematics teacher at the Holy Rosary Tamil school in Bogawantalawa, he was arrested by officers of the Kandy police at around midnight, last October 14. He was then held in the Kandy police station until November 2, and subjected to severe torture. He is now in the Bogambara Prison, also in Kandy.

The mother of Sivam Sivanandaraja, the other arrested Hatton area teacher, explained the circumstances of his arrest on October 13, 1998. Sivanandaraja had been travelling in a bus when Kandy police officers in civilian clothes arrested him. Sivanandaraja, 34, is a science teacher in Highland Central School in Hatton, and is also a member of the Tamil Teachers Union. His mother said, "My son is not connected to those organisations [such as the LTTE]. The allegations against him are all false. No one has inquired about his welfare except the SEP [the Socialist Equality Party, Sri Lanka]."

Sivam has two sisters who are also teachers and a younger brother who is a medical student at the University of Peradeniya. They have all been gravely affected by the detention of their elder brother. Sivam's mother said that her younger son's studies have suffered because he has had to devote time and energy to getting Sivam released. She has been unable to visit her son in prison due to new governmental regulations that require the police in her area to grant a permit sanctioning a prison visit.

Initially police claimed the teachers were being held on suspicion they were associated with the LTTE. Later they also sought to tie them to the Shannon bombing. Others being detained in Bogambara Prison on the same allegations of bombing the tea factory include:

Suppu Udayakumar and Pichchamuththu Chandran from Strathdon Estate in Hatton, Arunasalam Yogeswaran from Enfield Estate in Dickoya, Ponnaiah Saravankumar of Kotagala and Samimuththu Benedict from Salankanda Estate. Before remanding the six above named youth to Bogambara prison, the police succeeded in getting them to affix their names to confessions drafted only in Sinhala by subjecting them to repeated beatings and other tortures.

The savage conduct of the police attests to the racist oppression carried out by the People's Alliance (PA) regime against Sri Lanka's Tamil minority. But the campaign of repression the police are carrying out under the pretence that LTTE cadres have penetrated the plantation region is rooted in fears of growing working class opposition to the deteriorating social conditions that have resulted from the privatisation of the tea estates.

The mother of Suppu Udayakumar told the WSWs: "My son was arrested on June 12, while he was taking a meal at home. They didn't even say he was being arrested, but simply said that he was being taken for a chat outdoors. The arrest might have been acceptable if there existed any evidence against him, but this arrest is wholly unjustifiable."

She said she had not visited her son in prison due to the shock she had experienced after seeing how another young plantation worker had been treated after being arrested as an LTTE suspect. The youth was mercilessly and cruelly attacked by the police in front of his parents and relatives.

As a result of Suppu's arrest, the Udayakumar family of eight must now survive on the meagre wages of one person. Prison authorities are purposely delaying letters from Suppu and spoiling food sent to him from home. Udayakumar was in detention for two years on a previous occasion, and was released only as a result of a vigorous campaign carried out by the SEP's predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League.

Udayakumar's father spoke with gratitude of the SEP's campaign for the release of the political prisoners and in defence of plantation workers. "Our children were arrested without any evidence. Only the SEP fought for their release. Thondaman [a plantation trade union leader and a minister in the PA cabinet] is only interested in votes. He doesn't even talk about these problems."

The parents of Pichchamuththu Chandran also related details about their son. "He worked as a driver of a hiring van. He was asked to come to the police station and then they arrested him. His raincoat and even a pair of slippers were taken into custody as evidence. The police also have given orders not to release the van he drove until the investigations are over."

According to his parents, during his captivity Pichchamuththu was once brought home by police from the Colombo branch of the Special Investigations Division. His mother said that they were unable to recognise their son because he looked so weak and exhausted from the torture. She and her husband then added, "The SEP gave us courage in the midst of all these problems. We are confident that the SEP will help us in the struggle to have our children released."

SEP representatives were also able to meet with the mother and relatives of Samimuththu Benedict, another one of the detained youths. Samimuththu's mother, Shantha Mary, said: "I can't visit my son in prison because I don't have money. I had to spend a lot of money when he was arrested last time. Where would I get money to spend like this?" She said that she had received just one letter from her son since his arrest.

The SEP has initiated a campaign collecting signatures on a public petition from workers and others demanding the immediate release of these political prisoners. Over 500 people, including many plantation workers, have already signed the petition.



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