

Sri Lankan SEP picket in defence of political prisoners from plantation area

Our correspondent
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP—Sri Lanka) held a powerful picketing campaign May 16 in the hill town of Hatton, situated in the heartland of the tea plantations in Sri Lanka, to demand the release of political prisoners from the plantation area. The SEP's Plantation and Industrial Workers Union also played a role in organising the picket.

Eight political prisoners were taken into custody by the police nearly a year ago and are now being detained in Bogambara Prison in Kandy. Among them there are six Tamil speaking tea estate youths who were arrested in June last year, falsely charged with having participated in a bomb attack at a tea factory at the Shannon Estate in the Hatton area. Another two are Tamil teachers who were taken into custody in October and November last year, after authorities alleged that they had connections with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Parents and relatives of the political prisoners, plantation workers and students participated with SEP members in the picket, which was held for one hour in the town centre. While demanding the release of all political prisoners, the pickets chanted slogans opposing the racist war of the People's Alliance government against Tamils in the North and East of the island, and against the US-NATO war on Yugoslavia. The picket called for unity of the Sinhala and Tamil speaking working class, the fight for a socialist program, and the struggle to establish a Sri Lanka-Eeem Socialist Republic as part of the struggle for international socialism.

Five hundred people—including youth, students, teachers and other workers—gathered to watch the picket, and the demonstration drew the attention of thousands of passers-by who had come to town for the weekly Sunday fair. Reporters from the main national

daily papers covered the picket and the BBC Sinhala program of the day reported the campaign.

After the picket, SEP Central Committee member M. Aravindan addressed the crowd and explained the conditions of the political prisoners under the People's Alliance (PA) regime, recounting the brutal treatment they had received by the police. He also explained reactionary nature of the PA government's racist witch-hunt against the estate workers that has implicated them as collaborators of the LTTE, which is at war with the Colombo regime.

Aravindan accused the LSSP (Lanka Sama Samaja Party), CP (Communist Party) and especially the Ceylon Workers Congress, and other trade unions in the estate area, of joining in the regime's witch-hunt of the workers. He charged that these organisations not only maintained a deadly silence about the issue of political prisoners, but also connived with the police to conduct the arrests. He said the government was using the racist war to divert the resentment of workers towards the regime. Aravindan also denounced the US-NATO war against Yugoslavia.

Before the picket, about 20 SEP and Plantation and Industrial Workers Union members campaigned in the town to gather signatures on a petition demanding the release of the detainees. The campaign was warmly received, and prompted lively political discussion.

Eleven months have passed since the arrest of the six youths, on allegations that they were responsible for the bomb attack on the Shannon tea factory. Two Tamil teachers have been in custody for about seven months, but the police have failed to bring charges against any of them, proof in itself that the charges are completely unsubstantiated. The aim of the PA government and the state forces in these arrests is to intimidate and repress the plantation workers.

Another 15 tea plantation workers, from the Passara Group in Uva Province, have also been held in remand prison for nearly seven months. The workers were taken into custody after authorities alleged that they set fire to the plantation manager's bungalow, in an attempt to break a strike by the workers. The workers have denied the allegations, and the police have still not brought charges against them. In an effort to further intimidate the workers, on May 7 police obtained a summons through a magistrate to arrest 15 additional workers from the same estate. The 15 workers who are already in the remand prison are being produced every two weeks before a magistrate, who has continuously extended their remand prison terms. The SEP has launched a campaign in defence of these workers as well.

The People's Alliance government is using the war against the Tamils in the North and East to whip up racism to divide Tamil and Sinhala speaking workers. The PA regime's privatisation of the tea plantations has led to a sharp deterioration of working and living conditions for the workers.

While militancy amongst the workers has grown in opposition to these attacks, their unions have abandoned them. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) has supported the PA regime's attack on the plantation workers, and has remained silent on the arrests of the youths from Hattan. Although the Passara Group workers are members of the CWC, the union has only provided them legal counsel, and has not campaigned in their defence.



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