Sri Lanka: 300 families struggle for a place to live

Our correspondent
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Three hundred families within the city limits of Colombo have been engaged in a struggle for more than a month, demanding a place to live.

The families set up shanties on the banks of the Kelani River, in an area called Crows Island. On April 29 the People's Alliance (PA) government sent the police to demolish the shanties and chase the families away, claiming the land was needed for “development” work.

The people, shocked by the sudden invasion of police battalions armed with rifles and batons, dispersed in different directions, taking their children with them. But once the police had left they returned to the same plot of land, mended their rudimentary shanties and took up residence there, having no other place to live.

Some of the dwellings had only polyethylene sheets for roofs, while the roofs and walls of others were made out of coconut cadjans. Most of those living under these inhuman conditions are Tamil-speaking day labourers, who perform odd jobs in the city. They must search out such jobs on a daily basis and have neither a regular income nor any organisation to represent them.

On May 27 the police once again descended on the area and chased away the dwellers. This time the police were so brutal the people fled without taking any of their belongings. Many left behind their identity cards, which are rigorously checked at army barricades set up at several places in the city. They now can move about only at the risk of arrest.

A police guard was permanently installed at Crows Island, preventing the families from returning. They then occupied nearby Witts Wyke playground, which belongs to the Colombo municipality. Now the police insist they are illegally encroaching on public property and must vacate from there as well.

These people have no roof over their heads and are forced to move from place to place with their children, including infants. They are frequently drenched by monsoon rains.

When the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) learned of the plight of these families and visited the area, the people complained that none of the parliamentarians and municipal councillors for whom they had voted came to meet with them. They had very harsh words for these officials.

The SEP took the initiative to form an action committee to defend the Crows Island dwellers, with the participation of representatives elected by the dwellers themselves. A Central Committee member of the SEP, S.K. Keerthi, was elected by the dwellers to be the secretary of the committee.

The action committee took several decisions after hearing and discussing a political report given by its secretary on Sunday, May 30. One decision was to form teams to campaign daily for support and funds at nearby workplaces—Colombo Harbour, Fertiliser Corporation, Fisheries Corporation—and among workers in the neighbourhood. It also decided to hold a picket at the city's Town Hall centre and deliver a petition to the mayor of Colombo demanding housing facilities within the city limits.

A successful picket was held for more than an hour beginning noontime on Monday, May 31, with some 40 men and women faced with the housing problem participating alongside SEP members. A decision was taken that they should all should remain in the playground, as it could be locked up if they vacated it.

When a delegation led by the secretary of the action committee went to meet the mayor, he refused to meet with them and directed the delegates to the deputy mayor. After reviewing the petition, the deputy mayor made an appointment to meet with the delegates the

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next day.

The delegation demanded that the police not be used to evacuate those occupying the playground. They explained that they are staying there in the rain and without a shelter because they have no other place to go. The deputy mayor gave an undertaking that the police would not be used. The action committee immediately informed the police authorities of this assurance from the deputy mayor.

On June 1, when the deputy mayor met with the delegation, he told them he was powerless to provide a permanent place for the dwellers to live and directed them to the Ministry of Housing. Realizing that this was a tactic to demoralise the dwellers by sending them from pillar to post, the action committee insisted that it was the responsibility of the Municipal Council to provide shelter to those who live in the city, as the councillors are elected by the city's voters. At this point the deputy mayor left his office through the back door, saying that he had to attend another function.

Presently the action committee is organising daily political discussions among the dwellers at the occupation site, where they discuss the reasons for intensified social polarisation which has given rise to the housing crisis of the poor. They discuss as well the bankruptcy of all the old organisations that claim to speak for the working class. The experiences with the officials and so-called people's representatives of the capitalist regime, as well as the response received from workers and people from the neighbourhood, are also analysed.

In the course of the campaigns, SEP literature is widely sold and hundreds of rupees for the defence fund are collected. The question of forming a defence guard to protect the dwellers from attacks by the state forces has been raised and is under discussion.

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