

Sri Lanka: Displaced Colombo families appeal to the working class to support their struggle

Our correspondent
9 June 1999

The action committee to defend the right to housing formed by the 300 families evicted from their dwellings in Colombo has issued a leaflet in both Sinhala and Tamil, calling for support from workers and the poor to defend their struggle for decent housing.

The families had 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.

In the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo alone, 66,000 shanty dwellers live in temporary huts, according to official figures. But the real number is much higher, exceeding 100,000. This means nearly a third of the population of Colombo live in such shanties.

These dwellings do not have separate lavatories or running water. In some areas not even public lavatories are to be found. Such common lavatories, which existed earlier, have been demolished to make space for “development”, forcing women to fetch water for their families' needs from taps placed by the roadside.

Frequently these shanty dwellers are chased from place to place by the authorities under the pretext of making way for city development projects. Private contractors undertaking these so-called development projects also use thugs during the night to harass and chase the people away to clear the land for their business. It is reported that Crows Island, where the 300 families lived before they were evicted, was cleared to make way for a five star hotel.

The breadwinners of most of these families do not have permanent jobs. They work as day labourers in the city shifting heavy loads on their bare backs at fish and

vegetable markets, or depend on finding menial work in middle and upper class households.

According to the Human Development Report of 1997 from the United Nations, 38 percent of children below the age of five in Sri Lanka as a whole are undernourished. This percentage is much higher among the urban poor. The school dropout rate among children living in slums is also above the average for the country.

The families who were chased away from Crows Island now occupy the Witts Wyke playground, which is under municipal jurisdiction. They live under a constant threat of eviction.

Working closely with the Socialist Equality Party (SEP—Sri Lanka) the dwellers organised several teams on a daily basis to visit workplaces and neighbouring areas to appeal for political and financial support for their struggle. The full cost of publishing their leaflet in both Sinhala and Tamil was financed through these campaigns. Their appeal explained:

“We established an action committee under the guidance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) to defend our right to have a place to live. This right for decent housing is a basic human right that can only be defended with the support of the working class and the poor. The capitalist profit system has deprived us and many others in Colombo as well as throughout the country, not to mention other capitalist countries, of this basic right. The working class as an international class must come forward to defend our struggle for this right, laying the basis for a unified struggle on a world scale whenever and wherever this fundamental right to housing is denied or threatened.

“We realise the prospects for such an international

struggle and appreciate the work done through the *World Socialist Web Site* towards that end.”

The families ask that letters of support for their struggle be sent to:

The Mayor—Colombo City,
Municipal Council Building, Colomb—07,
Sri Lanka.

Fax: 0094-1-698067

The National Housing Development Authority,
Sir Chittampalam A. Gadinar Mawatha,
Colombo—02, Sri Lanka.

Fax: 0094-1-449622

The Inspector General of Police,
Police Headquarters,
Colombo—01, Sri Lanka.

Fax: 0094-1-446174.

Please send a copy of all letters to:

The Action Committee to Defend the Right to
Housing, No. 90, 1st Maligakanda Lane,
Colombo 10, Sri Lanka.

E-mail: seplanka@lanka.ccom.lk



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact