

# **Sinhala Heroes Forum intensifies racist campaign against Tamil workers in Sri Lanka**

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The Sinhala Heroes Forum or Sinhala Veera Vidahana (SVV), an organisation based on Sinhalese chauvinism, has stepped up its campaign against Tamils, particularly plantation workers, in the tea estate areas in central Sri Lanka. The SVV has accelerated its program of building branches in these areas, where more than half a million Tamil-speaking workers live, and accelerated its provocative activities.

The declared aim of the Sinhala Heroes Forum is to “protect Sinhala traders” in the name of salvaging the Sinhala nation from “Tamil expansionism”. It derives its support from among these traders but also has close relations with sections of the army and police.

On September 19, the SVV held a march and a public meeting in Bandarawela, a town in the plantation area, 200 kilometres from Colombo. The participants included Sinhala traders, Buddhist monks and local leaders of the opposition United National Party (UNP). On September 13, they had held a meeting to form a new branch in the area.

Another meeting, held in Hatton in the heart of plantation region on September 4, was sponsored by businessman D.K Weeratunga, the owner of several polyethylene factories, and attended by a number of local shop and hotel owners. Officer-in-charge of the Hatton police station also supported the meeting, and was seen directing some of the businessmen to the venue. Those attending were personally welcomed at the door with the words: “Please come in, please come in, if we do not organise this way we will be forced (by Tamils) to live bowing down our heads.”

Among those who participated were a number of policemen in plain clothes, a local UNP leader and some of the thugs responsible for attacking a demonstration of striking plantation workers in Hatton last year. More than half a million estate workers took

strike action in February last year to demand a wage rise. In Hatton, some of these thugs held a provocative demonstration calling for a wage cut for the workers.

The real purpose of the Sinhala Heroes Forum is to whip up anti-Tamil sentiment throughout the country and to create the pretext for the security forces to act against Tamil-speaking plantation workers, who are among the most oppressed layers of the working class in Sri Lanka. Since the privatisation of the tea estates, workers' conditions have deteriorated markedly. Now the tea and rubber industries face slackening export markets and declining prices. The planters have already proposed a wage cut and demanded further increases in productivity.

Fearing unrest among workers, the government has stepped up the activities of the police and army in the plantation areas. In a number of cases, estate workers have been detained for months allegedly for being supporters of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) against whom the army has been fighting a protracted and brutal war in northern Sri Lanka.

Six youths and two teachers from Hatton area have been in jail for over a year after being fraudulently charged with having LTTE connections. In another case, the management of Passara Group of Plantations used local thugs and police to mount a racist campaign against striking workers—28 were arrested and most have been in jail for almost a year.

The character of the SVV's activities was shown on April 30 in Nuwara Eliya, another major town in the plantation area. The meeting was timed to coincide with May Day meetings due to be held on May 1 by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the major trade union among plantation workers. On April 29, the organisers of the SVV meeting clashed with the CWC

activists who were decorating the town in preparation for the May Day.

On April 30, the SVV held a meeting in collaboration with another chauvinist group called the “National Movement Against Terrorism” and then, shouting anti-Tamil slogans, marched up to the place where CWC activists were erecting a stage. Police officers, who normally order demonstrations of workers or protests of the poor to disperse, watched and took no action.

The SVV exploits fears among Sinhala traders that Tamil rivals threaten their businesses. A prominent SVV organiser stated in the Sri Lankan press: “The Sinhala capitalists must unite to protect the power in the business... even though the Sinhala people are 74 percent of the population, 74 percent of business belongs to other communities.”

The anti-Tamil campaign, which receives coverage from prominent media houses like the Island Group, has been directed in the plantation areas mainly against Tamil workers, small businessmen in the towns and other professionals. It is aimed at dividing working people by inciting poor Sinhala peasants against the Tamil plantation workers who are just as oppressed.

The Sinhala Heroes Forum has all the makings of a fascist organisation—close connections with the state apparatus as an adjunct to its virulent racism and chauvinism aimed at mobilising disoriented sections of middle classes and petty proprietors against the working class.



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