

Police assault striking tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka

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Police from the town of Hatton in the central plantation area of Sri Lanka last week raided the Ottery tea estate in an effort to intimidate striking workers. About 20 police in plain clothes stormed into the workers' residences, known as "line rooms," on the evening of February 20 and assaulted Subramaniyam, a security guard on the estate. When other workers heard his wife's screams and gathered outside, the police fired into the air and fled in their vehicle, attacking two other workers as they left.

It appears that the police were acting on behalf of the management. Earlier in the day, the police tried to hunt down Subramaniyam to obtain the key to the estate office. When they failed to find him, they changed the lock after breaking the old one.

Some 104 workers have been on strike at the estate since February 10. Their main demand is that management deposit deductions made from their wages for the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and Employee Trust Fund (ETF) with the Central Bank, as required by law. Although the money has been deducted, no funds have been deposited for over 15 years.

Workers have been attempting to force the estate owner to make the payments for a number of years. With the tacit assistance of the police and unions officials, he has managed to avoid complying with various agreement and orders made by the Commissioner of Labour and the local magistrates court in Hatton. As a result, workers face the prospect of being left with no retirement benefits.

The striking workers have made other demands, including the registration of young people for work. Unemployment is a major problem on the tea plantations—about 100 youth are jobless at the Ottery estate. They are also insisting on the establishment of proper maintenance procedures. At present,

management is not even clearing the land around the tea bushes, threatening the viability of the estate and thus the jobs of those employed.

After hearing about the police raid, local leaders and workers from neighboring plantations gathered at the Ottery estate the following day. Hatton-Dickoya urban council member S. Logeswaran and other representatives of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC)—a trade union and political party—visited the estate and attempted to appease the strikers, saying the CWC would respond "if the police come again." Logeswaran promised that CWC leader and government minister, Arumugam Thondaman, would visit the estate on February 22 to resolve the problems.

The Ottery estate workers, however, continued to campaign for support from workers in neighbouring plantations. About 5,000 workers from Invery, St leas, Stempodil, Kinlock, Ann Field and Else Merry estates stopped work on February 22 to protest the police actions.

But the response of CWC leader Thondaman was the opposite. With striking workers and local union leaders awaiting his arrival, he rang to cancel the visit using the excuse that the Ottery estate workers were not CWC members. Those gathered left in disgust.

Fearing further police attacks, the strikers contacted their own union—the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU)—on February 23. But the LJEWU, which is controlled by the United National Party (UNP), the main party in the coalition government, has taken no action. The strike is continuing and police in plain clothes continue to roam the estate.

The WSWs interviewed several workers. One striker explained: "There are 45 casual workers who have been working for five years without permanency. Of them, 31 have not even received registered EPF numbers,

which means they are not eligible for EPF benefits. We went on strike for the same demands in October 2000. The case on the EPF issue has been dragged out in the labour courts because the management has not attended.”

Workers also expressed broader concerns over the deterioration of their wages and living standards. Early last year the unions called for the daily wage to be increased from 121 rupees to 200 rupees (\$US2) but finally agreed to a rise of 146 rupees. Workers only receive the extra 25 rupees if they achieve an 80 percent attendance rate. The target is impossible for most workers. Over the last year, the cost of living index has risen by 415 points or 13.6 percent, making life increasingly unbearable for low-paid plantation workers.

As a father of three children explained: “My monthly income is about 1,500 rupees (about \$US16). I have to spend about 1,000 rupees a month to buy milk powder for the children. What can we do with the balance of the money? We have to pay the loans and borrow again. At a minimum we need about 225 rupees for meals per day. But if I work 80 percent of the month, then my average daily wage reaches 146 rupees. Unlike other areas, we can’t find temporary jobs outside the plantations.”

“Sometimes our children don’t go to school because the teachers reprimand them for not wearing shoes and good uniforms,” a mother of four children said. “Though they [the government] said our situation would be better after the ceasefire agreement [with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)], we don’t see any such thing. Today our living conditions are worse than a year ago.”

Most workers on small tea estates face similar problems. To make matters worse, a number of small estates have been closed, forcing the employees to try to find low paid, often temporary jobs elsewhere. The strikers at the Ottery estate are concerned that they could face the same fate.



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