

# SEP campaigns among Sri Lankan rubber plantation workers

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A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team visited rubber plantation workers in Puwakpitiya, near Awissawella, about 50 km southeast of Colombo, to discuss the party's political program for the Western Provincial Council elections. The SEP is fielding a list of 46 candidates in the Colombo district, and the visit was part of the campaign for an election meeting to be held in Awissawella on April 5.

The Awissawella electorate is one of the poorest in the Colombo district. The area is predominantly rubber producing, featuring large plantation companies as well as small planters. The history of the plantation industry goes back to the final decades of the nineteenth century under British colonial rule. Most workers on these estates are descendants of Tamil-speaking labourers brought from Tamil Nadu in southern India to work in the plantations. They are among the most oppressed layers of the working class in Sri Lanka.

Rubber exports used to be Sri Lanka's third highest foreign exchange earner. However, since the late 1960s, world demand has declined. Workers' conditions have also deteriorated as plantation companies intensified the rate of exploitation in order to boost profits.

The SEP team visited the Elston and Farnham estates of the Pussallawa plantation. Approximately 1,400 workers, from about 650 families, are employed in the two estates. Most of the families live in line rooms—long, narrow buildings divided into rooms to house a family in each. Clusters of line rooms are separated from each other by 1 to 5 kilometres. The land is hilly, and while the roads used for estate operations are in good condition, those leading to workers' lines are not.

A few workers have been able to get small plots of land from the government. By earning additional money working outside the plantation, they have built small houses.

Rubber workers have to start tapping rubber trees early in the morning, even before sunrise. This continues for several hours until they start collecting latex into large heavy cans, which they have to carry from tree to tree.

A young worker, Ganesh, was rushing to collect latex because if he missed the vehicle that took the latex to the factory, he would have to carry his load himself. Although a co-worker retorted "we see all these politicians when an election comes," Ganesh was eager to talk when the team explained that its aim was to start a discussion on the important political issues confronting workers.

Ganesh explained: "I have two children. I have to feed my family of five, including my mother. It is very difficult. I can earn only 280 rupees (about \$US2.50) a day, provided I work 24 days a month. If not, the daily pay is even less. For this, we have to tap 325 to 350 rubber trees a day. It's not just tapping 325 trees because we've to go back to each tree after tapping to collect the latex. We're collecting at least 10kg of latex."

SEP members explained that President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government were systematically militarising the whole country while waging war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north. The government was increasingly slashing spending on essential social services to fund the war, which cost 200 billion rupees in 2008.

Ganesh commented: "Our young men, both from the north and south, die because of this war. 'Our government' lies to us. Who benefits from this war? Earlier the government was giving pregnant women 'threeposha' (a type of nutritional flour) for six months before and six months after the baby's delivery—two packs a month. That has now been slashed to at most two months before and two to three months after the delivery. Our women need nutrition. How can they continue

to work if they are weak?"

An expectant mother explained: "I can't go to work because I'm pregnant. Only my husband is working. If he couldn't go to work we would lose earnings for that day. We can't tap [rubber] when it rains and we find it hard to even afford meals. This month will be difficult for us; we had to pay for my child's treatment."

Asked about the war, the young woman said it was sad to see so many young men die. "We have some kind of a job, but the war refugees have lost everything. We want to see the end of the war." She continued: "We can't travel without an identity card, or the police will arrest us. I applied for an identity card last year, but the application was returned a year later, asking for my birth certificate. Everything is blocked for Tamils. Did they need one year to inform me the application was incomplete? I had to wait five hours to get the application signed by the estate superintendent."

"They treat the estate workers like dogs. I have two children and I'm pregnant too. We don't have toilet facilities—the estate management demolished them. We have to go outside. Often I face health problems and doctors ask me to drink more water. But where can I pass urine? So I don't drink water."

Arumugam, who was about to finish work for the day, stopped to speak to the team, relieving his head of a latex can's weight. "I'm retired, but I came here to help my wife. It is very difficult to live just with my wife's salary. We're in debt. We can't have meat or fish in our meal even once a month."

Awissawella was once a Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) stronghold and local workers took part in the 1953 Hartal (general strike). However, the LSSP betrayed the principles of Trotskyism by entering the bourgeois Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) government in 1964.

Raju, a retired worker, recalled those experiences: "In those days the LSSP was with the workers, irrespective of their nationality, religion—they had no differences. They fought for us. Now it's not like that. I was a member of the LSSP trade union. Now it's a rich people's party."

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), a trade union/political party dominated by a small well-off elite, was one of the beneficiaries of the LSSP betrayal. In the ensuing years, the CWC exploited its base of support among the plantation workers to enter successive governments.

Raju added: "The CWC has betrayed workers. The union leaders say that it is not advisable to strike because there is a war going on. The JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—a Sinhala extremist party) is also like that."

Raju agreed with the SEP's call for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all troops from the north and east of the island in order to unite Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers to end the war. "This government depends on this war. Tamil people can't walk freely on the roads nowadays. The army and police are looking at us suspiciously because we're Tamils."

Raveenthiran, a worker, wanted to speak about the JVP, which was prominent in the campaign to win office for Rajapakse in 2005. "I contested the 1994 election for the JVP. I thought they were principled—that's why I joined them. They said there was no division between Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim ethnicities for them. But what happened? They betrayed us. Their principles were not there when it came to the war—they support it."

None of these estates have a hospital—the nearest is at Awissawella, about 6 kilometres away once residents get to the main road. Running water and sanitary facilities are pressing issues and are always "election promises" by the main parties. As workers put it, "they speak so generously" in election campaigns but no promises see the light of the day.

SEP public meeting  
Town Hall, Awissawella,  
April 5 at 3 p.m.



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