Sri Lankan unions collaborate in police witch-hunt of plantation workers

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Union leaders assisted the police in bringing 18 plantation workers from Bogawanthalawa before the magistrates court in Hatton on Tuesday. The workers are accused of attacking an office of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and police officers during a workers' protest against last week's wage deal.

The police are yet to frame charges against the workers, but, given the nature of the allegations, the penalties could be serious. All 18 workers were bailed—9 on cash sureties of 1,500 rupees ($US13) and the remaining 9 on sureties of 4,000 rupees. All were required to enter personal bonds of 100,000 rupees to appear in court on October 27.

Trade union officials have agreed to produce another 16 workers before the same court by the end of this week to face the same accusations. This is a witch-hunt unleashed by the police, with the collaboration of the trade unions, to intimidate and silence workers who oppose the deal struck between the unions and companies to impose poverty-level wages for another two years.

Speaking to the WSWS, workers accused the CWC, whose leader Arumugam Thondaman is a government minister, of preparing the list of names of workers and sending it to the police. These workers were among tens of thousands who have protested against the collective agreement signed by the CWC, the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC) with employers, agreeing to a daily wage of just 405 rupees ($US3.50).

The workers appearing in court include members of the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC), Ceylon Workers Alliance (CWA) and National Union of Workers (NUW). These unions, along with the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (APCWU), claim to oppose the wage deal but are working to contain widespread anger among workers and pave the way for its implementation.

Plantation workers in the Bogawanthalawa area held a protest on September 15 against the union sellout, only to be attacked by CWC-organised thugs. Police exploited the provocation to fire tear gas to disperse the crowd. After this incident, the DWC, NUW and CWA, which had called the protest, called off a previously arranged public meeting, saying they were heeding a police warning about further attacks by CWC thugs.

The next day, workers at the Kotiyagala, Bredwell, Bogawana, Tillary, Theresa, Lynsted, and Bogawanthalawa estates went on strike to oppose the police actions. Hearing that CWC leader Thondaman was visiting the area, about 5,000 workers marched into Bogawanthalawa town in a show of protest. Police blocked their way and allowed Thondaman to leave. To disperse workers, police fired tear gas and warning shots over their heads.

By last weekend, police had informed the leaders of the DWC, CWA and NUW that they had been faxed a list of 34 workers who had attacked the CWC office and the police during the protest on September 16. Most of the workers on the list were members of one of these unions. Three were CWC members. After speaking to the police, all the union leaders agreed to produce the workers in court.

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To justify their actions, the union officials told the workers that the CWC had wanted to have them arrested under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which allows for indefinite detention without trial. The officials claimed that by agreeing to the police request, they had pre-empted the CWC move.

This is simply a cover-up. The police knew that arresting workers on the estates would have sparked angry protests so they asked these unions to do their dirty work. By rounding up the accused workers for the courts, the unions have demonstrated their role as industrial policemen of the working class in the most literal sense.

Antony Chrisdender, the Kotiyagala DWC branch leader, was among the workers facing charges in court on Tuesday. Speaking about the actions of the police on September 16 and the wage deal, he told the WSWS:

"The CWC leaders sent the police to attack us. The government also has intervened against us. The workers are discussing that the unions are useless. The 500-rupee demand is older than two years. It was presented in 2006 and they have agreed to a 405-rupee daily wage, dropping that demand too.

"This meagre wage increase is not enough to manage the increasing cost of living. When workers protested against this agreement the government unleashed a terror campaign against us by sending police to attack us and frame up workers."

All of the unions, including those that claim to oppose the wage deal, are functioning as tools of the government and big business. The DWC and the Up Country Peoples Front (UPF), which is led by another government minister, P. Chandrasekaran, have appealed to President Mahinda Rajapakse to intervene, just as he did in 2006, when they accepted the president's demand to accept the last sellout wage deal and ended all strike action.

The APCWU, which is controlled by the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), postures as more militant than its rivals. Last week, however, APCWU leader Ramalingam Chandrasekar, declared that his union would decide any future actions in concert with the other unions that have rejected the wage deal.

The Bogawanthalawa witch-hunt is a warning not only to plantation workers but the entire working class. The Rajapakse government has declared an "economic war" in order to impose the burden of the deepening economic crisis onto the working class. This regime will use the repressive state apparatus, built up during the war in the North and East, against working people workers as they come forward to defend living conditions, jobs and democratic rights.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has explained throughout the plantation workers' struggle the necessity for workers to break from the unions and form workers action committees in plantations and every workplace to defend their rights on the basis of a socialist perspective. The initiative taken by the Balmoral Estate workers in Agarapathana on Sunday to establish an action committee is a significant step in this regard.

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