

Sri Lankan provincial election

SEP campaigns among Free Trade Zone workers

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As part of its campaign for the Southern Provincial Council elections on October 10, the Socialist Equality Party spoke to workers from the Koggala Free Trade Zone (FTZ), 16 kilometres from the provincial capital of Galle. The SEP is standing a slate of 26 candidates for the Galle district.

It takes three and a half hours by public transport to travel the 132 kilometres from Colombo to Koggala along the coast. From the entry to point to the province, one is greeted with huge hoardings with the smiling faces of candidates from the main parties. Those from the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) have an accompanying photo of President Mahinda Rajapakse. Significantly, none of the hoardings address any issues or list any policies, but try to reach out to local voters with phrases like “poor man’s friend”, “one of our own”, “our village boy” and “from our village”.

Koggala FTZ was built in the late 1980s by the United National Party (UNP), currently the main opposition party. More than 90 hectares were acquired by driving out hundreds of families despite their deep opposition. The land was then leased to investors for a pittance. Factories were set up with the assistance of further government concessions such as tax exemptions and the vigorous curtailing of workers’ rights. Koggala FTZ commenced operation in 1991 and currently has 20 commercial enterprises employing about 10,000 workers. Fifteen manufacture garments for export—mainly to US, European Union and Canada.

Under the impact of the global economic crisis, garment workers have been hard hit by lay-offs and attacks on working conditions. The apparel industry in Sri Lanka faces bitter competition from the other lower-wage countries such

as Bangladesh, Vietnam, India and China. As exports dry up, companies are slashing jobs, pay and conditions or closing up altogether.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 60,000 apparel workers had lost their jobs in Sri Lanka by the first quarter of 2009. According to the latest Sri Lankan statistics, 11 firms attached to FTZs shut down, laying off 3,198 workers between September 2008 and January 2009. Three factories in Koggala Zone—Asia-Tec Ltd, Speed-line Ltd and JJ Ltd—closed 6 months ago, laying off 1,300 workers.

Like other Free Trade Zones, no visitors are allowed inside the Koggala FTZ without prior permission from the authorities. Workers are transported from factories to their accommodation. SEP campaigns spoke to workers who live close by and walk to work, or who take public transport.

Asked about the election, a worker from Orient Garment expressed his anger toward all parties: “Go and see the interior roads in this electorate. All of them are ruined. Even five years after the tsunami, some families still live in damaged houses. Politicians promised to solve all of these problems.

“I supported the government MP during last provincial election, because he promised to offer us better jobs. Of course, he forgot his promise. I don’t believe in any political party and will not vote for anyone in the upcoming election. However, I like speaking to you because you present a different program.”

There are about 375 workers in his factory earning a basic monthly wage of between 7,850 (\$US68) and 9,250 rupees. An incentive of 1,000 rupees is paid also and overtime pay is 90 rupees an hour. However, due to the economic recession,

the usual quotas from the US have been terminated, leading to the axing of all overtime work. Workers are getting only their basic, very inadequate salary.

Those unable to survive on the base pay have quit. To retain workers, the management offered a transport service, so workers can travel from their homes and save on boarding fees. It was more profitable for management to pay for transport than increase wages. However, the transport has also been cut back to one service a day.

Many workers thought that their life would improve after the army defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May and ended the island's protracted civil war. However, the Orient Garment worker explained that nothing has happened.

Recalling a recent police killing of two youth in Angulana, he said: "They [the police] carry out crimes disregarding basic laws. They kill anyone on the pretext of curbing the underworld! If they treat Sinhala youth in this manner, I can imagine how they must be treating Tamils."

He said the SEP's demand for the unconditional release of 280,000 Tamil civilians detained by the government had opened his eyes. "What is happening in this country? On the one hand, there is no way to survive with this pittance. On the other hand, there are no democratic rights. At the same time, we don't have an organisation to fight against these conditions," he said.

A worker from Flintec Ltd said: "Please don't talk about the elections. I can't stand any of those politicians. They change their political affinity with each election. This can only mean that none of these parties have any programmatic differences."

Describing how candidates splash hundreds of millions of rupees on election campaigns, he added: "They know they can earn that money within a short period after becoming a member or minister in the [provincial] council. I won't vote for any party. After all, what can you change by an election?"

Pointing to the records of the opposition parties, he said: "Most people will vote for ruling UPFA because they don't have another choice." He said that none of the parties had done anything about the disaster facing working people.

Flintec produces cells for electronic scales for the US market. The decline in exports has led to a cut in production

from 2,000 cells a day to just 500. About 20 percent of workforce has been sacked and weekend shifts have ended.

A young woman working at Unichehele Ltd, which produces ladies underwear, explained: "Most of us earn only 8,000 rupees per month. We have to produce 130 pieces per hour. On an 8-hour shift we have only a 37-minute break for tea and other needs. The administrators exert a terrible pressure on us to meet the targets and sometimes we work continuously without even going to the toilet. There is no peace in our minds at all.

"Our working hours and workloads won't be reduced under any government. Living conditions won't be raised because the companies run their factories for their profit. We have learnt so many lessons in the recent past. When they get massive profits they don't give bonuses to us. But when they lose, they ask us to work harder without overtime payment or we lose our jobs."

Asked about the war, she exclaimed: "What changes have taken place in our lives after the war?" Pointing to President Rajapakse's call for workers to "sacrifice for the nation" like soldiers sacrificed in the war, she commented: "That means we have to live in this misery forever."

Karunawathie, 65, a widow who runs a small shop in the area, explained what was happening to families who made a living providing services to the Koggala FTZ: "We can't make even 100 rupees daily profit now. When there were girls working in the FTZ staying at nearby homes, I sold about 25 loaves of bread a day. But now it is different. Yesterday, for example, only 5 loaves were sold."

She continued: "When the war ended after much devastation, we expected a better life. But now we have fallen into the fire from the pan. Earlier, the president told us to be patient until the end of the war. Now he is telling us to be patient until he builds the country! However, to be patient, one must first of all live. We are fed up with this government. We voted for this government because we were fed up with the previous UNP government. We will not vote for any political party in this election."



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