

Sri Lanka: Pro-government thugs attack plantation workers

Panini Wijesiriwardena
24 March 2010

In another incident of election violence in Sri Lanka, an armed gang associated with the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) attacked the houses of five members of the rival National Union of Workers (NUW) at the RB Division of the Ramboda Estate on March 17. The thugs warned workers not to support NUW leader R. Thigambaram, who is standing in the Nuwara Eliya district in the April 8 general election.

The CWC is a trade union that also functions as a political party among mainly Tamil-speaking plantations workers in the island's central hills districts. The CWC is part of the ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and its leader Arumugam Thondaman is a cabinet minister in the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. The rival NUW is allied with the opposition United National Party (UNP).

A similar incident took place on March 13 when a CWC mob menaced members of the Ceylon Workers Alliance (CWA) led by S. Sathasivam at the Frotoft Estate near Kotmale. The CWA is also part of the UNP-led electoral coalition.

The RB Division of Ramboda Estate is a tea plantation about 20 kilometres from the town of Nuwara Eliya. The RB division, a private estate of 140 hectares with only 150 workers, is owned by a close relative of CWC leader Thondaman.

The ownership of the estate underscores the peculiar character of the CWC, the oldest of the unions/political parties that function among plantation workers. Thondaman and his relatives own a number of plantations. He treats the CWC as his political property and runs the organisation like a benevolent society bound together by religious and caste ties. CWC members have

no say in the running of the union.

The fragmentation of the CWC and the formation of the NUW, CWA and other parties reflects the deep-seated hostility of plantation workers to the CWC and its decades of betrayals. New political mechanisms were needed to contain the half million estate workers, who form one of the most impoverished layers of the Sri Lankan working class. However, the alignment of the NUW and CWA with the right-wing UNP underscores the fact that these organisations no more represent the interests of estate workers than the CWC.

A WSWS reporting team visited the Ramboda Estate two days after the attack. The victims were ordinary workers—members of the NUW, not officials or election candidates—who were angry about the destruction of their homes and fearful of further violence. Two of the houses were completely destroyed. The others were partially destroyed. Belongings were ransacked or burnt. Members of other unions were also angry over the attack on their fellow workers.

The WSWS was told that police from the nearby Kotmale station were complicit in the violence. “We saw that the police first went to the bungalow of the estate owner,” a resident said. “They later came house-to-house and warned us not to open our doors if someone tapped. They did not say why. We sensed something would happen. Most males fled their homes and hid in secure places on the estate.”

A worker said that those who planned the attack wanted the men to flee because they did not want any resistance. “I asked the attackers not to come inside as only women and children were there. They broke down our door and came in and made death threats,” she said. The thugs had

warned: “As you are living in an estate of Thondaman’s cousin, you cannot support Thigambaram or vote against Thondaman. If you support Thigambaram you cannot work or live in this estate.”

Another worker said: “We were able to identify some of the attackers and gave their names to the police when we lodged a complaint. As in the past, nothing has happened since. When the thugs were leaving the estate, the police were there. The police didn’t take any action, even when we shouted out to arrest [the thugs]. The police were accomplices with the attack. So how can we expect justice from the police?”

For the victims, the damage was devastating. Pointing to the family’s battered television, one father explained that “as plantation workers, buying a colour television is like realising a dream. As you know our daily wage is just 285 rupees [\$US2.50]. That is not enough for a single meal for a family. So how can we buy TVs? My wife bought the television and some other things by working in the Middle East [as a migrant worker].”

The majority of plantation workers live in tiny houses less than 14 square metres in area. A few have been able to extend or improve their barrack-style homes using their own money. “We just completed the extension of our house. They destroyed that in this cruel way. My wife, poor woman, was unable to live in that for a single day [as she is away]. Now her earnings of five years have vanished in smoke,” one worker said.

The attacks at the Ramboda and Frotoft estates are a sign of desperation. The CWC has been widely discredited through its role in imposing sell-out wage deals on plantation workers in 2006 and 2009. In December 2006, a two-week strike erupted in defiance of the CWC and the agreement it had reached with plantation owners. The companies and the Rajapakse government relied on the Up-country Peoples Front (UPF), the NUW and the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) to defuse the anger and get the strikers back to work without any gains.

The same line-up took place last September. The CWC reached a deal with the plantation companies that was sanctioned by the government. The “opposition” unions called for limited protests and warned of wider strike action, but abruptly shut down the campaign and accepted

the CWC agreement without a further murmur.

Those open betrayals have had a sharp impact on the CWC’s electoral support. During provincial elections last year, it was unable to win a single seat in the Nuwara Eliya-Maskeliya electorate of the Nuwara Eliya district. The NUW and CWA gained seats mainly because they had postured in opposition to the CWC. In the presidential elections in January, Rajapakse, supported by the CWC, did not receive a majority in the Nuwara Eliya district.

The latest CWC thuggery, apparently in collaboration with the police, is another sharp warning to the working class. The government and its various political allies will resort to any method to win the parliamentary election, including intimidation and violence. But the government is also preparing to unleash drastic austerity measures in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund and similar measures will be used to crack down on resistance by workers.

In opposition to every other party, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is standing in the April 8 election, including in the Nuwara Eliya district, to fight for a socialist program and the formation of a workers’ and farmers’ government. We are urging workers and youth to begin to mobilise independently through the formation of action committees to defend their basic rights. For workers on the RB Division of Ramboda Estate and other estates, the setting up of such organisations is necessary to protect all workers and their families—regardless of the union to which they belong or vote for. We urge all workers to carefully study the SEP’s program, vote for our candidates and apply to join our party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact