

Sri Lanka: Action committee against evictions appeals to workers

By our correspondent

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The Action Committee to Defend the Right to Housing (ACDRH) has issued an appeal to all workers and young people, urging their support for the struggle to protect the homes of Colombo's shanty dwellers. The ACDRH has also decided to launch a campaign to explain to working people the government's plans to evict 66,000 families in central Colombo.

The committee was formed in early October with the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). Members of the committee met in late October to discuss their campaign and the written appeal to workers. Many of those on the committee have now been issued a government token indicating that they will be evicted.

As discontent over the evictions has grown, the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP) has started to posture as a defender of the shanty dwellers. The UNP, however, is a big business party that has ruthlessly carried out evictions in the past. In power from 2001 to 2004, the UNP had a similar slum clearance plan to transform Colombo into a commercial hub for South Asia.

Speaking about the appeal, one female participant explained that residents have found out they could be sent to places like Homagama, 30 kilometres from Colombo city. "We can't go out of Colombo and live. If the government demolishes our houses, we should be given good houses in the city. How can we continue in our jobs when we go out of the city?" she asked.

"We have been here for generations. Everyone is working here. We will face lots of problems [if we are forced to leave]. Our children are going to Colombo schools. Even now we face a lot of difficulties just earning an income daily. We should stress that everyone must be given a house in Colombo."

Another person explained: "The government is taking steps to remove people section by section. The reason is the [government's] fear that people might get provoked [if the evictions are done all at once]." He suggested that the appeal be distributed in Tamil in order to unite Tamil and Sinhala-speaking people who are confronting similar problems.

The SEP supports the action committee's campaign to defend their right to decent housing. The government's plans to throw thousands of families out of their homes to release prime land for property developers and foreign investors are criminal. The evictions are part of government's "economic war" to impose the burdens of the global financial crisis on the working class and the poor.

We urge the working class and young people to support this campaign. Establishing an independent action committee is a courageous first step by a layer of impoverished shanty dwellers to defend their basic rights in the face of President Mahinda Rajapakse's increasingly autocratic rule.

We also urge workers facing attacks on their jobs and living standards to follow the lead given by the ACDRH and form their own independent action committees. None of the parties of the political establishment—government or opposition—or the trade unions defend even the most fundamental rights of working people.

The SEP fights for a workers' and farmers' government to refashion society from top to bottom on a socialist basis to meet the needs of the majority of workers and poor, not the profits of the wealthy few. This is part of an international struggle by the working class, which in

every country faces the imposition of austerity measures.

We publish the ACDRH's appeal below:

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An appeal to the working class!

Support our campaign to defend housing rights in Colombo.

The United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government is taking steps to clear Colombo slum houses where 66,000 families are currently living, in order to lease out the land to foreign and local big business.

For this purpose the Urban Development Authority (UDA) and Land Reclamation and Development (LRDB) have been placed under the defence ministry. On August 12, the cabinet approved a plan to carry out these evictions.

Because of this plan we, who are very poor, will lose our inalienable democratic right to a home. And this plan will affect our livelihood and the upbringing of our children, including their schooling.

The government claims it will provide housing for us. We have no faith of these bogus promises. Over the past decades, governments have cheated us with such promises. Except for a few families, the UPFA government has not supplied houses for those removed in 2008 from Glenny Street and in May 2010 from Mew Street at Slave Island in central Colombo. And the housing that has been provided is not fit for human habitation.

Thousands of families have already been issued with tokens, targetting them for removal. But the government has not built any housing schemes in the city to provide alternate accommodation. And we have not seen any plans by the government to do so.

Our eviction is part of the government's plan to convert Colombo into a "commercial hub" for investors and to "beautify the city" to attract tourists for the benefit of business. This plan is part of the government's "economic war" on working people—freezing wages, increasing the prices of essentials, slashing free education and health, and cutting subsidies.

The government is also planning to abolish the longstanding Colombo Municipal Council and to place it under the authority of the defence ministry.

The government has used and will use the police and military to evict us. Families at Glenny and Mew streets have already been the subject of police operations. In July, hundreds of police and soldiers rounded up 8,000 people at Mattakkuliya after a protest over the arrest and beating of a young man. These methods, used during the war in the north and east, are now being employed in Colombo.

We condemn the government and the media who slander us as "anti-social elements". The government's plan to evict us and keep us in poverty is an anti-social act on a huge scale.

We need decent houses in Colombo city. It is our right. We call on all shanty dwellers to support our fight. Set up your own action committees. Distribute copies of this appeal. Send your representatives to the ACDRH so we can extend the campaign.

Hundreds of billions of rupees should be allocated to build decent houses with all the necessary facilities, such as electricity and piped water. The government, which defends the profit system, will not provide us with proper housing, just as it has failed to address the other pressing needs of working people. We have no faith in the opposition parties—the UNP or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—which also defend capitalism. Only by fighting for a socialist program can any of the basic rights of the working class be defended.

We need the assistance of workers. We particularly ask our class brothers and sisters working at the Colombo Municipal Council, UDA and LRDB, and other workers, to refuse to take part in the planned evictions.



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