

# Sri Lankan SEP campaign to release political prisoners: Plantation detainee and relatives speak to WSWS

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As a part of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign demanding the release of political prisoners in Sri Lanka, WSWS reporters visited political prisoners and detainees' parents in the central plantation areas of the country, which are predominantly home to Tamil-speaking workers. During the government's war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Tamil plantation workers were subjected to frequent harassment by the security forces.

Six plantation youth are still languishing in Badulla prison, some of whom were taken into custody even after the war ended in May 2009 following the defeat of the LTTE. In October 2010, Thalamutthu Suthakar from Thalawakelle Estate and P. Chandrasekaran from Holy Rood Estate at Thalawakelle were arrested. On March 11, 2009, Athi Jems Suresh from the Derry Claire Estate, Kotagala was arrested, as were Muthusamy Kalimuthu, Palani Pathmaraj and Muthusamy Jeyakumar from the Court Lodge Estate, Kandapola in 2008.

Several plantation youth detained earlier on various flimsy allegations related to the war remain in prison as well.

Those arrested have been detained as alleged "LTTE suspects" under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). By this law, prisoners can be held without trial for indefinite periods, extended periodically. Some of the plantation youth were accused of possessing firearms, yet no evidence has been produced and no charges laid.

At least 6,000 Tamil political prisoners are being held in undisclosed camps run by the security forces in the north and east. They were among 11,000 youth arrested by the military just after the war and held arbitrarily without charge in torturous conditions. The government claims to have released 5,000 of these prisoners, but they remain under close surveillance by the military and police.

The indefinite detention of political prisoners is a part of the suppression of the democratic rights of not only plantation

workers but the working class as a whole by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Speaking to WSWS reporters, political prisoners and their parents denounced the parliamentary parties and trade unions that pretend to represent plantation workers and Tamils, for doing nothing to free detainees.

One prisoner said: "The plantation trade unions and political parties are completely silent about us. They haven't even issued a statement on defending us or raised the issue in the parliament. The Tamil National Alliance (TNA—a northern based Tamil capitalist party) has talked about prisoners but only in a limited way.

"We are facing this situation because of the betrayal of these parties and unions. Some former LTTE leaders are enjoying privileges as ministers of the government but we are suffering in prison. So far only you [the SEP], as a political party, have come to see us."

The main plantation trade unions, which also function as political parties, include the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Up-Country Peoples Front (UPF) and National Union of Workers (NUW). They are partners in Rajapakse's ruling coalition. These unions backed the war, the emergency laws and the PTA, and support pro-market economic reforms, including the privatisation of plantations. They assist the government and the employers to impose poverty-level wages on workers by suppressing every struggle for higher pay.

The CWC has a vicious record of providing lists of plantation workers and youth who were their political opponents to the police in the 1990s.

The TNA acted as the parliamentary mouthpiece of the LTTE during the war and is now tailing behind the Western powers and the Indian government in trying to strike a bargain with the Colombo political establishment to secure privileges for the

Tamil capitalist elite.

The WSWs contacted Mano Ganeshan, the leader of the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC), the trade union of the Democratic People's Front (DPF). He poses as a champion of workers' rights, but admitted: "I agree that no union, including ourselves [DWC], did anything to release political prisoners."

Trying to brush aside his responsibility, and sow illusion that the government could be pressurised to release prisoners, Ganeshan said: "Those unions within the government have more responsibility to talk with it to arrange their release."

In the recent local election campaign, Ganeshan, with the help of the pseudo-radical Nava Sama Samaja Party, sought to exploit hostility among Tamils to the government but did not even mention the political prisoners during the campaign.

Likewise, none of the leaders of the UPF have raised a finger, even when UPF members have been arrested as LTTE "suspects". While he was a partner of the previous Kumaratunga government, the late UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran maintained an opportunist collaboration with the LTTE, yet he was also a cabinet minister in Rajapakse's government and supported the war against the LTTE.

When UPF youth wing leader Thalamutthu Suthakar was arrested last year, the WSWs asked UPF general secretary A. Lawrence what actions it would take to release him. Lawrence bluntly stated: "He is not our member. He defied our policy."

Suthakar's father Selliah Thalamutthu this month told the WSWs: "My son was actively working for the UPF when he was arrested. Now he has been in prison for a year. Nobody in the UPF cares about him. He was a very active trade unionist. He campaigned to get 3000 teaching appointments for plantation youth."

Thalamutthu said his son's militant activities may be the reason for his arrest. "In 2009, the plantation workers continued to struggle for higher wages [defying government threats and the betrayals of unions, including the UPF]. My son was very active in this campaign. He also fought to defend the rights of families who lost their houses and properties under the Upper Kotmale power supply scheme.

"Like my son, hundreds of youth are held as political prisoners in different locations facing severe difficulties. Why this discrimination?"

Thalamutthu was the assistant secretary of the UPF's trade

union wing, the Up-Country Workers Front, but left it when his son was arrested. "I have learned a lot about these organisations," he said. "All of them are cheating us. So in the last elections I did not vote any one. I appreciate the SEP's campaign and I will support it."

Thalamutthu recalled that his own father had been an active leader of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in the area and said the LSSP's betrayal had severely affected the working class. The LSSP joined the coalition government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964 to save capitalist rule.

The mother of another prisoner spoke of her family's plight following the arrest of her son. "My husband and I were plantation workers. Now we are retired. We have two sons. The elder son has married and is living separately. We were looked after by the arrested son. Since his arrest we have faced severe difficulties.

"My son was ordered by the police officers to sign a document which included false charges, but he refused. He told them that if they forced him to do so, he would commit suicide," the mother explained. "We don't have money to spend fighting court cases," she added.

As the SEP explained in its October 4 statement launching the campaign to release political prisoners, this fight is "inseparable from the broader struggle to defend the democratic rights of the working class and rural masses from the attacks of the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse."

The SEP urges all class conscious workers and the youth to join the SEP campaign. It is clear that the struggle for the release of political prisoners is bound up with a political fight against the trade unions and establishment parties, which back the government and the capitalist state.



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