

SEP campaigns for plantation workers' congress

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The members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) received a warm response when they visited Shannon Tea Estate workers in the central plantation district to campaign for the plantation workers' congress to be held in Hatton on May 20.

Campaigners distributed copies of the statement "Sri Lankan SEP calls plantation workers' congress", calling on tea, rubber and coconut estate workers to send delegates to the congress. Workers discussed the political issues confronting estate workers, including the betrayal by trade unions of their struggles to defend jobs, wages and social conditions.

In the Grand Top Division of Shannon Estate near Hatton, workers are currently campaigning against increased tea plucking targets by the company. Protests against the higher workload are widespread in the plantations as companies seek to intensify exploitation and maximise profits.

In the Grand Top Division, more than 100 families live in line houses in terrible conditions that are common in the tea plantations. Their living standards have worsened as President Mahinda Rajapakse's government has carried out International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures that have driven up prices for essential items, including fuel and transport.

Many estate managements have increased tea plucking targets since December. Shannon Estate workers have had their daily quotas raised from 17 to 20 kilograms since February. After workers refused to accept the increase, the management slashed their wages. Workers held protest pickets on paydays in

February and March and are still applying the old work norms.

More than 20 workers gathered around the SEP and ISSE team for a discussion. Their names have been withheld to protect them against victimisation.

One worker angrily told the WSWs: "As you can see, these tea bushes are very old. We are the fourth or fifth generation plucking tea from these bushes. The company doesn't put adequate fertiliser around these plants to help them grow well and give a better harvest. How can you meet the increased target? We met the earlier targets with much difficulty. They are not spending money to get a higher harvest. Instead, they are trying to exploit us to the bones."

He explained how the management now determines wages: "They calculate the number of working days by dividing the total weight of plucked tea leaves and adjust wages accordingly. Workers get a lesser pay as a result."

A female worker explained that the management had reduced her wage even though she had plucked more tea than in the previous month. "Even after this much work, I received only about 8,000 rupees (\$US63) this month. As the prices of essentials are skyrocketing, we have only two meals a day, with a single curry. Doctors advise us to have balanced meals. How can we do that with this pittance?"

She ridiculed a recent claim by Education Minister Bandula Gunawardane who said a monthly income of 7,500 rupees was enough for the expenses of a family of three. "They enjoy luxuries—7,500 rupees is not

enough for just one of their meals. But they ask us to live like paupers.”

There are five trade unions at the Shannon Estate, including the Ceylon Workers’ Congress (CWC), Democratic Workers Congress and Up-Country Peoples Workers Union.

Expressing disgust with the unions, one worker said: “In calling off the go-slow action by workers at the Kotiyagala Estate against higher targets, the CWC claimed that the companies agreed not to increase the target. But what has happened? Our management is continuing with the higher target.”

The CWC had intervened in March to end a lengthy go-slow protest by Kotiyagala workers after the management agreed to revert to the old target. The company feared that the protest would spread to other estates, and also expected the CWC to assist in raising the target at a future date.

Another worker said: “Management say that they are running at a loss. We don’t believe that. According to a newspaper report, the plantation companies, including Watawala Plantations, are making millions of rupees in profits.”

Referring to the unions, he added: “Not only management, but also the unions are playing the same tune. They talk about the losses of the company and ask us to adhere to the new targets. They have no concern about the burdens we face”.

The police also function as an arm of management. A worker explained: “When the workers held a picket to reject the pay reduction, the management informed the police. The police also told us to work according to the new target.”

The workers went to the assistant labour commissioner in Hatton with their local union leaders but he also told them to work according to the management’s norms. “Referring to the losses pointed out by management, he told us not to create a situation that could close the factory.” The union leaders instructed workers follow the labour commissioner’s

advice.

The campaigners drew attention to a passage in the SEP statement: “This betrayal only underlines the fact that workers confront a troika—government, management, and the unions—that is waging a relentless joint offensive to boost profits and productivity at their expense.” One worker nodded and said: “Actually that is what we are experiencing in our struggles.”

In discussing the global financial crisis and workers’ struggles around the world, the same worker asked why these strikes and protests had failed. After the SEP campaigners explained the treacherous role played by the trade unions and various ex-left groups, workers began to identify similar organisations working among Sri Lankan plantation workers.

“Most of the unions and the political parties that work in the plantations consciously try to separate the Tamil-speaking plantation workers from other sections of workers,” the worker said. “They say a separate program is needed for Tamil workers. Now I understand that the political independence and international unity of the working class is important for our struggle.”

The SEP and ISSE members raised the importance of workers establishing independent action committees of their own to fight for their rights and the necessity of a workers’ and peasants’ government based on a socialist program. Many questioned followed. The group of workers indicated their support for the SEP statement by raising their hands and promised to take part in the congress of plantation workers.



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