

Sri Lanka: Fire destroys plantation workers' homes

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Over 100 people, including infants and children, have been forced into temporary accommodation after a fire gutted 22 homes and 7 makeshift sheds on May 3 at the Middleothian Division of Mocha Estate. The fire is believed to have been caused by an electrical fault. The victims are being temporarily housed in the estate school.

The blaze at the Mocha Estate, which is located at Maskeliya in Sri Lanka's central hills district, is the third line-room fire in the region in the past 12 months. Fires were reported at the Brownsick Estate and the Bargro Estate in April last year with more than 20 homes damaged or destroyed.

Most Sri Lankan plantation workers and their extended families live in line-rooms, the substandard barrack-style accommodation originally provided on the estates during the British colonial period.

Transport in the area is minimal and, like other estates, accommodation is inadequate and unhealthy. Forty-nine families are living in temporary huts without proper water supply or adequate toilet facilities and are compelled to drink un-purified water.

WSWS reporters recently spoke with some of the survivors who angrily complained about their living conditions.

A female estate worker living at the school with her two small children said: "We lost everything within a half an hour—TV, clothes, birth certificates, identity cards and other things. We bought many of these things through loans but have now lost them and still have to pay the debt.

"We can't even think of buying those things in future because our salaries are not enough, even for food. Many people repaired these very old houses by obtaining loans from Employees Provident Fund [pension fund]. In our estate many workers are living in temporary sheds because plantation management hasn't helped new families build or repair homes. We don't believe management will help us to rebuild our burnt out homes."

Another plantation worker explained that if the estate had provided separate dwellings then most workers and their families would not have been affected by the fire.

"The fire started in one house and very quickly spread to all the others. We've been living in this old line-system accommodation for more than 100 years. In April last year more than 20 houses were gutted by fire at two other estates in Maskeliya and those people are still living in temporary huts.

"Governments come and go but our lives do not change. The trade unions keep telling us that they are with the government in order to help us but we still live without basic facilities.

"This estate is not properly maintained by the management and because there's not work for everyone here. Some workers are sent to Tharawala estate in Dickoya, which is about 25 kilometres from here. Several years ago we were sent to work at a Monaragala sugar factory, which is more than hundred kilometres away. If we opposed these orders we would lose our jobs."

The worker explained that because there was no fire-fighting or any other rescue service in the area families had to try and extinguish the flames using buckets of water. “We were screaming and crying; that’s all that what we could do,” he said.

The main plantation trade unions, including the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Up-Country People’s Front (UPF) and the National Union of Workers (NUW), are part of Sri Lanka’s ruling government coalition. The other plantation union, the Democratic Workers’ Congress, is affiliated to the right-wing United National Party (UNP). These organisations have completely ignored the housing problems confronting plantation workers, and worked with management and the government to suppress demands for better wages and conditions.

Another estate worker said: “The politicians and trade union leaders only come around during election times and then to lie and cheat us. We’re fed up with this government, and the previous UNP governments, who are all propped up by the unions.”

Fires in plantation workers’ line rooms are a common occurrence in Sri Lanka. While more than 200 line-room homes have been incinerated by electrical faults in the last ten years, no remedial action has been taken by plantation companies.

According to the Department of Census in Sri Lanka, more than one million people live in the estates, 64 percent of them in line rooms. An estimated 150,000 housing units are needed to fulfil current accommodation requirements.

During the 2010 presidential elections, President Mahinda Rajapakse pledged a new home for every plantation worker family. “One of my major goals is to make the plantation community, a house-owning society,” his so-called Vision of Mahinda (*Mahinda Chinthanya*) declared. “Instead of the present ‘line rooms’, every plantation workers’ family will be proud of a new home with basic amenities by the year 2015.”

Rajapakse claimed that his government would

allocate 5 billion rupees per year for this purpose—with 440,000 rupees per housing unit, a grossly inadequate sum. In fact, the total amount required to replace line-room accommodation with new housing units is 66 billion rupees. His pledge is less than one third of the required funds.

According to a recent *Sunday Times* article by a former secretary for Ministry of Estate Housing, Infrastructure and Community Development, M. Vamadevan, the annual amount required is about 13.2 billion rupees. Vamadevan pointed out that the Rajapakse government’s budget allocation for 2011 was only 481 million rupees, “only 9.62 percent of the pledged amount” in his Mahinda vision.

WSWS reporters held long discussions with workers at the Mocha Estate and other plantations over the housing crisis, pointing out that it could not be solved under the capitalist system. Neither the plantation companies nor the Sri Lankan government will allocate funds for this purpose.

Only by nationalising banks and the big corporations, including the plantation companies, and reorganising the economy on socialist lines could the necessary funds be found to fulfil the basic accommodation needs of working people.

The provision of a decent home for all is a basic social right that requires a political fight by the working class for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement this socialist program. This is part of the socialist and internationalist perspective that will be discussed at the forthcoming Plantation Workers Congress organised by the Socialist Equality Party on May 20.



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