

Sri Lankan SEP campaigns among rubber plantation workers

Our reporters
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A Socialist Equality Party campaign team for the Kegalla district in the September 8 Provincial Council (PC) elections visited the Ambadeniya rubber plantation this week. The SEP is standing a slate of 21 candidates—headed by SEP political committee member Ananda Daulagala—for Kegalla, in the southern Sabaragamuwa Province.

Kegalla is one of the country's main rubber plantation districts. Out of a district population of 650,000—20 percent of whom live below the poverty line—some 30,000 plantation workers are entitled to vote.

About 350 families live on the 58-hectare Ambadeniya plantation, 6 kilometres from Kegalla town. Plantation workers are among the lowest paid labourers in the island, receiving only 415 rupees (\$US3.20) a day.

Together with tea and coconut plantation workers, rubber workers have been hit hard by the austerity measures imposed by President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government. Increases in oil and gas prices have led to soaring prices for all essential commodities. Even the official inflation rate, which understates the impact on working people, has reached 9.8 percent.

Because of their poor wages, many female workers from Ambadeniya used to travel to the Middle East to work as housemaids. But that source of employment has contracted due to the worsening world economic slump. Unable to find work on the plantation, many young people are forced to seek occasional day work elsewhere. Some girls find jobs in garment sweatshops.

Most people to whom the campaign team spoke said they had no faith in Rajapakse's government or the

official opposition parties. They expressed anger over the escalating cost of living and poor living conditions, and said they had decided not to vote for anyone in the election.

Lengthy discussions were needed to explain the difference between the SEP's revolutionary socialist program and those of the other parties. There is broad disaffection with the entire political establishment. When the campaigners pointed out that SEP stands not to reform the capitalist order but to replace it with a socialist society, based on restructuring the economy under public ownership and the democratic control of the working people, they won a favourable response.

A female worker explained her circumstances: "Earlier I worked in this estate. As we could not survive with these wages, I went to Middle East. I worked there for 14 years as a housemaid. I expected some improvement in our lives. But I only managed to renovate my house and buy some home appliances. While I was abroad, my husband died due to alcohol addiction. Now I have nothing in savings."

The woman described how the employment agencies and employers exploited the workers who travelled to the Middle East. Several times she had been forced to leave a job and find work elsewhere because she did not receive the wages promised by the job agency. "In Saudi Arabia I did not have any rest, good food or the required medicines," she added.

Her youngest daughter had just finished school after sitting for the GCE Ordinary Levels. "Tomorrow she has to face a job interview for a garment factory. The base salary is 11,000 rupees [a month] and altogether she might get some 15,000 rupees. The work at these factories

is too difficult. The lives of our children are getting worse than ours. President Rajapakse and his government say that they have improved our lives. Rather than any improvement, our lives are being devastated.”

The woman’s son-in-law joined the dialogue, and outlined the terrible conditions in the health system. Due to funding cuts, the nearby government dispensary lacked adequate medicine and facilities. “At the moment my son is suffering from fever. As we don’t have proper medicines and qualified doctors in the dispensary, I had to spend 1,200 rupees to get private treatment for him.”

The son-in-law said life was becoming very difficult. “A packet of milk powder costs more than 300 rupees and one kilo of rice is 60 rupees. How can we feed our children with this kind of cost of living? The government says the country is developing but we don’t feel it.”

Many workers voiced hostility to the trade unions. These organisations operate as industrial police on behalf of the government and the plantation companies, which constantly demand increases in the backbreaking workloads and cuts to the poverty-level wages in order to remain “internationally competitive”.

All the unions, including the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, the Up-country Peoples Front and the Democratic Workers Congress, have opposed or sold out the struggles of workers.

A young supervisor described how the unions betrayed the recent strike by plantation workers. “When workers struck last year, demanding a 550-rupees daily wage, we supported that. It was a very reasonable demand. But the trade unions, mainly the CWC, told workers that the companies could not afford that increase as they were losing profits in the international market. This is an utter lie. Their profits are in the billions. In return for these betrayals, the union leaders get concessions from the companies and the government. Now the workers are in an angry mood.”

The young supervisor said the unions’ base among workers had eroded during the past two decades. Previously, almost all the estate workers were members of the CWC, which is a partner in Rajapakse’s ruling

coalition. “Many workers now think that, as part of President Rajapakse’s government, the CWC is responsible for the attacks against the workers.”

Nallu Arugar, 36, a harbour worker in the capital Colombo, explained the difficulties workers had faced during the government’s communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which ended in 2009. “When the war was going on, we were afraid to leave the estate, because of the threat of arrest by the police or military. If somebody had no identity card, it was very likely they would be severely harassed,” he said. In these conditions, it was impossible for him to work in Colombo. “Now the war is over and we can go to the town without that fear. But, we have to face another war—the skyrocketing cost of living. I don’t see a way to defeat this enemy.”

In the discussion that followed, the SEP team pointed to the global breakdown of capitalism as the root of the attacks being faced by the workers the world over, including in the US and Europe. Campaigners argued for the necessity to establish workers’ power in every country to meet the burning needs of the masses. Arugar said he would attend the SEP public meeting, being held on August 5 in Kegalla town, for further clarification.

During the campaign, the SEP team reviewed the experiences and the importance of the plantation workers’ congress that the party convened in May. The congress discussed the need to initiate a counter-offensive by plantation workers and the political perspective that must guide it. The first step is a political rebellion against the trade unions, and the formation of Action Committees as the basis for an independent movement against the companies and the government on the basis of a socialist program (see: “Sri Lanka: SEP holds plantation workers’ congress”).



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