

Sri Lankan police attack estate workers protesting police killing

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President Maithripala Sirisena's government is responsible for a blatant assault on basic democratic rights, with Sri Lankan police attacking plantation workers and youth who protested against the death in police custody of a young man near Hatton, in the central hills district.

The police repression followed the death of Manoj Marimuthu, 21, from the Great Western Galkanda Estate, who was arrested on January 31 at Talawakelle town, near Hatton. The police claimed that he was in possession of babul—a local mild drug-related betel product. While being taken to the police station by two officers in a three-wheel taxi, Marimuthu supposedly jumped out, ran to a nearby irrigation tank and drowned himself.

This story is highly suspicious. The police station is only about 200 metres from the market place where Marimuthu was said to be arrested, but the irrigation tank is some 500 metres away. According to local residents, no one saw the police carrying out the arrest.

On hearing the news, thousands of workers from Great Western and other estates, and youth in the town, gathered near the tank the next day to protest, blaming the police for the young man's death. His body was found at 5 p.m. The crowd was so large that a train stopped running through the area. Police, including the special task force that was mobilised to the scene, tear-gassed and baton-charged workers while firing warning shots into the air.

Because of the popular anger, the police announced the transfer of two officers, but immediately launched a manhunt for those allegedly involved in the protest. Police claimed that by using their video footage, they could identify 84 participants. Five of them were arrested on February 2 and denied bail. Another person working at an estate temple, Muruthai Rajalingam, was

later arrested as well. Fourteen others, who were asked to surrender to the police, handed themselves in at courts this week through lawyers.

At the Nuwara-Eliya magistrates' courts on Monday, police successfully opposed bail for Rajalingam, alleging that he led the protest and they did not know his personal details, even though he provided this information. The other 19 who were arrested or surrendered were granted bail for 5,000 rupees (about \$US40) each. They have to report to the police each Sunday, until the case is heard on March 2.

All 20 face possible imprisonment. The police have indicated that they could be charged with obstructing a magistrate's inquiry, unlawful assembly, obstructing rail transport and using criminal force.

Marimuthu's father told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters: "I don't know why my son was arrested. He did not use any drugs. The police are responsible for his death. He is my only son. He was working to build a telecom tower for a private company. My wife and I are retired workers and depended on him. On the day of the arrest, he went to the town to buy food for our poultry."

The police only told the father that his son had allegedly jumped into the tank when he went to police station to inquire about Marimuthu at about 7 p.m. on the day the incident occurred.

One youth explained what happened the next day: "Hearing the news, people went to the location in Talawakelle. When we arrived, nothing was happening to recover Marimuthu's body. Gradually thousands of people from various surrounding estates gathered there. Seeing the large crowd, a train was stopped. None of the people blocked the train as the police claimed. The police provoked people, attacking them."

Plantation trade unions helped the police, not the workers who faced repression. Great Western estate

residents approached Ceylon Workers Congress leader and former government minister Arumugam Thondaman for help through a local leader. He refused to assist, insisting that something could have been done only if his representatives had been there at the outset.

Workers also contacted National Union of Workers leader and present government minister P. Digambaram. He advised 22 workers named by the police to go to the police station and give statements. Fourteen workers refused to heed his advice, fearing arrests. Instead, they surrendered through lawyers on Monday.

Police routinely harass plantation youth in order to help enforce the oppressive conditions in the estates. Plantation workers are among the most poorly paid sections of the Sri Lankan working class. They are often geographically isolated. Great Western estate, which is six kilometres from Talawakelle, only recently acquired a transport service—small vans run by private owners four times a day.

In an attempt to deflect the outrage among workers, the Sirisena government ordered a police inquiry. Two higher police officers from Nuwara-Eliya district met Marimuthu's father and took statements. However, such an inquiry will only classify the death as a suicide and justify the attack on workers as an act of self defence by the police.

Sri Lankan police are notorious for killing detainees. Over the past several years, dozens of people have died in police custody and similar explanations given, such as suspects jumping into rivers or canals, or suspects trying to shoot arresting officers. Such statements are not challenged by the judiciary. The media also defend these killings by saying that suspects were from the criminal underworld.

During the communal war mounted by successive governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the police and security forces conducted many unlawful killings and forced disappearances.

The entire working class must oppose the repression unleashed against the Great Western estate workers and defend their democratic rights. This repression is a message that the Sirisena government, despite its utterances of good governance and democracy, will utilise police-state methods against any opposition, just as the previous regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse

did.



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