

Sri Lankan police arrest estate workers following strike against quota increase

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Police from Maskeliya, in Sri Lanka's central hill district, last week arrested eight young tea estate workers, including a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporter, on fabricated charges. The arrests at the Glenugie estate's Deeside division are part of a witch-hunt against those who held a three-day strike on the estate last month over a unilateral increase in their daily picking quotas.

As part of the crackdown, the management of the Glenugie estate, which belongs to the Maskeliya Plantation Company, has initiated an internal inquiry against G. Wilfred and the other seven. The inquiry was scheduled for today but without explanation has been postponed to March 26. Eight charges have been laid, including verbally abusing and physically assaulting a field officer and disturbing the work of a field division. In the charge sheet, management has hinted that if the charges are proven, the workers could be sacked.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns this blatant witch-hunt which is not only aimed at those workers but at intimidating all Glenugie workers and plantation workers. The company and police have attempted to enlist some workers as witnesses. We call on workers not to fall into this trap, to defend their persecuted workmates and to unite to defend the rights of all.

SEP supporter G. Wilfred was in the forefront of the strike, campaigning among workers to form an action committee to fight the betrayal of the struggle by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and other trade unions. The other workers arrested are M. Nesturiyan, S. Duglusnuman, F. Franklin, F. Anton Julian, J. Jackson Joy, S. Benedict, and T. Jayaram. They were imprisoned overnight in Hatton before being bailed out in return for 50,000-rupee (\$US375) personal guarantees.

A Deeside worker told WSWS reporters: "After the strike last month, the Glenugie estate management began putting more burdens on workers, to take revenge, with the support of the CWC branch leadership. These arrests were based on false stories, created by the management to victimise and intimidate workers."

The fraudulent police allegations include the throwing of stones at a wasp nest to provoke wasp attacks, and a supposed physical assault on an estate supervisor. In reality, the wasp attack occurred accidentally, not due to the throwing of stones. Wasp attacks have been commonplace for several years on many estates, affecting hundreds of workers, many critically, because the managements have not properly cleared the wasps off estates.

As for the supervisor, the CWC prompted him to report to police that he was assaulted. Wilfred and other workers, hearing about the strike, went to the location to find out what was happening. They simply argued with the supervisor, condemning him for sending female workers to the area.

Workers have denounced the media for promoting the bogus reports about the wasp attack in order to support the plantation management. One worker told the WSWS: "Sakthi TV broadcast this false story. Its reporter, who lives in the Deeside estate, is also the vice president of the CWC branch here and works closely with management. This channel did not report our three-day strike last month."

Deeside estate workers struck for three days from February 10 against the management's decision to increase their tea leaf plucking quotas by 2 kilos a day to 18 kilos without any extra pay. They walked off the job independently of all the estate trade unions. Most of the workers on the estate were CWC members before

the strike. However, more than 100 sent resignation letters to the union branch during the strike because it opposed their fight.

There are also local branches of two other unions, the Upcountry People's Front and the National Union of Workers (NUW). NUW leader P. Digambaran is a cabinet minister in the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The NUW branch initially supported the strike, but its area leader, Naguleswaran, later intervened to sabotage the strike. He claimed that the management had agreed to reduce the target and that additional payment for extra work could be won through court action.

When the police declared that they wanted to arrest the eight workers, NUW leaders collaborated with the Glenugie estate management and the Maskeliya police chief. After discussions between the union, the company and the police, they asked the eight workers to voluntarily go to the courts, saying they would be bailed out. Instead, the workers were arrested and only bailed the following day. Their case is to be heard in April.

These developments at Deeside are part of a wider pattern. The estate trade unions are working with the plantation companies, the government and the police. In essence, they are functioning as industrial police in the plantations to increase the rate of exploitation of workers. The unions regularly make wretched deals with the plantation owners at the expense of workers' conditions. Police harassment routinely occurs to enforce the repressive conditions and the unions take the side of the police. Many workers have left the unions because their filthy role.

Last month, workers at the Great Western estate near Talawakelle, also in the central hills area, faced police violence and harassment after protesting against the suspicious death of a local youth in police custody. He drowned in a tank (irrigation dam) after supposedly escaping from police. Police attacked protesting workers and 20 workers were later arrested on charges of unlawful assembly and obstructing a magisterial inquiry.

Police attacks and harassment are worsening amid developing unrest among plantation workers. The current two-year collective agreement is due to expire in April and the plantation unions are getting ready to

try to impose another sellout based on a pitiful pay rise.

Workers in all the estates and other workers across Sri Lanka and internationally must oppose the witch-hunt against the Deeside workers and come to their defence.



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