

Sri Lankan tea plantation workers oppose Glenugie estate witch-hunt

M. Devarajah
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Glenugie tea estate Deeside division workers at Maskeliya in Sri Lanka's central plantation district have spoken out against the police and company management frame-up of eight fellow workers. The Deeside workers were responding to a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) statement distributed last Sunday calling for unified action to defeat the witch-hunt.

On March 11, police arrested eight workers on fabricated charges that they physically attacked an estate supervisor and stoned wasp nests to disrupt work at the tea estate. The victimised workers, including an SEP supporter, G. Wilfred, were bailed-out on personal guarantees the following day. The case against them will be heard on June 24.

The management made similar bogus accusations against the eight employees and announced an internal inquiry. If the charges are "proven," the workers could be sacked.

There are indications that Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) trade union leaders and management prompted the supervisor to make a complaint to the police. This repressive response is a crude attempt to intimidate the workforce, following a three-day strike against increased work quotas.

The bogus nature of the allegations was demonstrated when the name of T. Jayaram, one of the workers arrested, was removed from the list of those charged. In his place, the management added another employee, S. Janaratnamm, to the list.

Jayaram told the WSWS: "Management removed my name from the list because I was far away from where the incidents are supposed to have happened. Having my name on the list could easily expose the fabricated story and so they removed it. Management created this false story, with the support of the unions, in revenge against workers who launched a strike against the

increased workload."

A retired estate worker said he fully supported the SEP campaign to defend the victimised workers. All workers at Deeside and other plantations should be mobilised, he said.

"I have my own experience," he explained. "Ten years ago, during a wage struggle nine workers from the estate, including me, were arrested. I was then CWC branch president. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman refused to mobilise any other workers to defend us. I took up the initiative to mobilise other workers in defiance of the CWC leadership, and we were released."

Estate employees said they would oppose all attempts to victimise the eight workers, insisting that the management witch-hunt was an attempt to frighten the workforce and drive up productivity.

Several months ago, the estate management raised the tea-leaf pluckers' daily workload by 2 kilograms, from 16 to 18 kilos. The company was forced to reverse its dictat after workers went on strike, independently of the estate unions, but is still attempting to increase workloads.

A Deeside worker explained: "After the strike, the Glenugie estate management, with the support of the CWC branch leadership, began imposing more burdens on workers to take revenge."

A female worker said: "One manager came to the field and said that if we cooperated and worked according to the 18-kilo target, he would make some concession. We refused to do this because our three-day strike won our demand for 16 kilos and so we can't go back."

"Every day since the strike, the management has imposed many burdens on us, such as increasing working times and ending short-leave facilities, which

we had before the strike. Today a field officer declared that we had to be back at work at 2 p.m. sharp after lunch and that if we were a few minutes late we'd have to work until 5.30 p.m. Normally our work ends at 4.30 p.m."

Another worker condemned the living conditions on the estate: "More than 60 workers have no houses in our estate. Some live in temporary huts, others live with parents, with two or three families congregated in one house. More than 50 percent of workers have no toilet facilities. If a worker wants to build a new toilet he has to get loans from other means. Even then, management does not want to allocate land for that. There are no proper water facilities in the estate.

"More than 30 retired people are working to earn additional income but their pay is tied to the work quota. Management always thinks only in terms of increasing company profits."

The CWC, the National Union of Workers (NUW) and other estate unions are collaborating with management to drive up workloads. NUW area leader G. Naguleswaran supported the management's verbal agreement to maintain the 16-kilo quota but told workers they would have to go to a labour tribunal to secure payment for the several months they worked under the 18-kilo quota. The unions have done nothing since then to obtain the money owed to the workers.

The NUW and other plantation unions, including the Up-country People's Front (UPF), the Democratic Workers Congress and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU), are backing the recently installed government of President Maithripala Sirisena. In fact, NUW, UPF and LJEWU leaders are among Sirisena's ministers. In line with his government's big-business policies, they fully back the plantation companies' demands.

As well as the Maskeliya estates, all 22 plantation companies want to drastically ramp up work quotas, slash production costs and drive up profits.

Plantation Employers Federation chairman Rosan Rajadurai told the *Virakesari* newspaper on March 24 that the tea and rubber industries "face severe losses in the world market" due to falling prices and "productivity must be increased."

Rajadurai declared: "The average quota of plucking tea leaves is 18 kilos but without increasing it by 2 or 3 kilos, the industry cannot go forward. We are

demanding 23 kilos per day and we will make this demand in discussions for the next collective agreement."

As these comments make clear, the struggle to defend the victimised Deeside workers is inseparable from the fight against the attacks being prepared by the plantation companies, backed by Sirisena's government.

The SEP urges all class conscious workers and youth to come forward to defeat the Deeside frame-up as part of a unified struggle for better working conditions, a decent monthly wage system and the defence of the democratic rights of the working class. This fight requires taking up the SEP's socialist and internationalist program.



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