

Sri Lankan plantation company victimises strike activists

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The management of the Glenugie tea estate, Maskeliya, in Sri Lanka's highlands, has sacked three workers, including a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporter, and suspended four others for one month on framed-up charges for playing a leading role in a three-day strike in February.

Workers at the estate's Deeside division launched the strike against the company's increase in the daily picking workload from 16 kilos to 18 kilos. The victimisation of the seven workers is designed to send a message to all workers that the employers will impose higher workloads ruthlessly.

On May 22, the Glenugie estate manager summoned the seven workers to his office and informed them that management had decided to sack three of them—SEP supporter G. Wilfred, M. Nesturiyan and F. Franklin. Those suspended were S. Duglusnuman, F. Anton Julian, S. Benedict and S. Janaratnam. The workers refused to accept the company's punishment letters because they were written in English, which they cannot read. They requested the letters be translated into Tamil, their native language. No such letters have yet been issued.

Because of the strike, the management withdrew its increased work targets but started constantly harassing workers. Workers complained that management used supervisors to ask them to increase production and strictly imposed working times, which are impossible to meet in difficult plantation areas.

Eight workers were bogusly accused of provoking a wasp nest after the strike to harm workers. They were also falsely blamed for physically assaulting a field supervisor. Far from defending the workers, the trade unions have collaborated with management and the police.

Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) local leaders

prompted a supervisor to make a complaint to the police against the workers. When police sought to arrest the eight workers, National Union of Workers (NUW) leaders called on them to surrender themselves. NUW leader P. Digambaram is a cabinet minister in the United National Party (UNP)-led government installed by President Maithripala Sirisena.

The workers were arrested by the Maskeliya police on March 11 and bailed at the magistrates court in Hatton on March 12. The next hearing has been scheduled for June 24.

Management also began its own "inquiry" into the charges, aimed at persecuting the workers. This month-long inquiry began on March 25 and ended on April 25. Management could only get "evidence" from one supervisor and a workers who might have feared reprisals if he did not. However, others came forward to testify on behalf of the targeted workers and to prove that the accusations are totally baseless. A month after its so-called inquiry finished, the management announced its punishments.

A government parliamentarian, UNP representative R. Yogarajan, last week conducted back-door discussions with the management, supposedly seeking a "compromise." It appears that he intervened after one or two victimised workers sought his help. He has asked the sacked and suspended workers to reach a "settlement" with the management. They would have to accept the charges in return for reduced punishments, from sacking to one-month suspension and from one-month suspension to one-week suspensions. It is not clear whether management has agreed to this so-called compromise.

Regardless of management's response, this is a trap for the workers. This is not a "settlement," but acceptance of guilt on the basis of a frame up. If

workers accept this punishment they will be at the mercy of the management, liable to be sacked at any moment on any flimsy accusation. They could be threatened and warned not to get involved in any future struggles of workers.

Any acceptance of the bogus charges could also be used against them in the criminal prosecutions against them. Workers must reject the proposed “settlement,” which only strengthens the hands of the plantation companies.

Yogarajan, the government parliamentarian, has a record of betrayal. He was once a leader in the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation sector trade union. He played a similar role as a leader of the UNP-led Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union. The trade unions and their bureaucracies do not represent the interests of workers, but those of the companies. In the plantations these unions, like other trade unions, act as an industrial police force for the government and companies.

We urge workers at Glenugie and the Maskeliya Regional Plantation Company, which controls the estate, and in plantations as a whole, to oppose this blatant victimisation. They must demand the unconditional removal of the punishments and the reinstatement of the sacked and suspended workers.

The witch-hunt against the Glenugie workers is not an isolated incident. Across the board, companies are seeking to impose the burden of the worsening crisis of the tea and rubber plantations onto the backs of workers. The Employers Federation of Ceylon rejected any wage increase for plantation workers during discussions with the trade unions held on May 18 about the next collective agreement.

The employers are also demanding a substantial increase in daily tea-plucking quotas by 5 kilos, from the current average of 18 kilos. This increase is permitted under the agreement that the trade unions struck with the employers in 2013.

Raising productivity and increasing workloads while real wages stagnate or decline—these are the demands of big business and the international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

Deeside workers must oppose this attack on their colleagues. The working class, not only in the plantations but other workplaces, must support them

and rally to their defence. The fight against the victimisation at Deeside is part of the broader struggle to defend democratic rights and fight against the increasing workloads on the basis of a political struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies.



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