

Sri Lanka: Reinstate victimised Deeside plantation workers!

**The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) condemn the sacking of three workers and the suspension of four others by the management of the Glenugie tea plantation in Maskeliya in the Central Hills district and demand their immediate reinstatement.

These workers were victimised because they played a leading role in the three-day strike in February of the Deeside division of the Glenugie plantation against increased work-loads. Management has punished these seven workers in an attempt to suppress any resistance against their regime of increased exploitation.

What took place at the Deeside division is a rehearsal for broader attacks by government and the corporate elite on all sections of the working class. Workers in private companies as well as state-owned enterprises confront the same incessant demand for increased productivity while wages and jobs are slashed in order to boost declining profits.

The SEP and IYSSE call on the working class as a whole to come to the defence of the victimised Deeside workers as the starting point of a counter-offensive to defend jobs, conditions and basic democratic rights, including to take strike action.

This campaign will have to be waged in opposition to the trade unions, which have been instrumental in suppressing the struggles of workers. We call for the establishment of democratically-elected Action Committees, independent of the unions, in all plantations, industries and work places to fight for the reinstatement of the Deeside workers and defend the rights of the working class.

Deeside workers took strike action because the estate management suddenly increased the daily quota of tea leaves plucked from 16 to 18 kilograms in order to

receive the daily wage.

Following the strike, the management concocted a false complaint against workers who had been in the forefront of the stoppage. A field supervisor told police that the workers physically attacked him and interrupted the work of other workers by stirring up a wasp nest. The workers were arrested on March 11 and were produced before the Hatton Magistrate Court the following day, then released on bail.

The role of management was clearly exposed during a hearing of the Hatton Conciliation Board on June 7, which proposed a settlement between the two parties. The accused workers vigorously denied that they had attacked the supervisor and condemned the allegations as a complete fabrication. The supervisor indicated that he was prepared to reach a settlement, but after contacting management by phone reversed his stance. He bluntly declared that if he agreed to a deal, he would suffer the same fate as the accused.

At the same time, the company conducted its own bogus internal inquiry from March 25 to April 25. Many workers testified that there had been no attack on the supervisor and that the allegations about the wasp nest had simply been made up. Only the supervisor and one other employer gave evidence against the accused workers.

Despite the lack of evidence, the management summoned the accused to the company office on May 22 and sacked SEP supporter G. Wilfred along with M. Nesturiyan and F. Franklin. S. Duglasnuman, F. Anton Julian, S. Benedict and S. Janaratnam were suspended from work for a month.

The workers refused to accept the formal letters notifying them of their punishment on the grounds that they were in English, a language they do not understand. They still have not been given letters in

their own language, Tamil.

Far from defending the victimised workers, the trade unions lined up with the estate management and the police. The regional leadership of Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) advised the supervisor to lodge a formal police complaint against the workers. When police wanted to arrest workers, the National Union of Workers (NUW) directed the workers to surrender themselves.

The trade unions habitually side with companies and the government. NUW leader P. Digambaram is a cabinet minister of the United National Party (UNP)-led government appointed by President Maithripala Sirisena.

UNP parliamentarian R. Yogarajan, a former CWC leader, intervened in the dispute to work out an underhand deal between the management and the workers. He proposed that, if the workers accepted the charges, the three sackings would be reduced to one-month suspensions and the four one-month suspensions be cut to one week.

Yogarajan's proposal was a trap for the workers, not a "settlement." An acceptance of the charges would open the workers up to further company punishments in the future and to police charges. More fundamentally, it would undermine the legitimate right of workers to take strike action to defend their conditions, jobs and rights.

The experience of the Deeside workers has demonstrated once again that the trade unions and their corrupt bureaucracies operate not on behalf of workers, but function as industrial police for companies to suppress the working class.

The attack on Deeside workers is not an isolated case. Following the action of the Glenugie management, employers at the Dickwella Estate in Hali-Ela increased the daily tea plucking target from 16 to 20 kilograms. Workers revolted against the speed-up and took strike action in May to demand the new target be reversed.

The plantation companies, along with the trade unions and government, insist that workers must bear the burden of the worsening breakdown of the profit system, reflected in falling prices for commodities like tea and rubber.

During negotiations on May 18 between the Ceylon Estate Employers' Association (CEEA) and the unions over a new collective agreement, the CEEA flatly rejected any wage increase and demanded a 5-kilogram

increase in the tea plucking target. The talks abruptly broke down. The unions will not wage a struggle to defend wages and conditions as their perspective is to ensure that the industry remains "internationally competitive."

Plantation workers in every country are facing the same demands in what is a dog-eat-dog competition for markets and profits. In every industry, it is the same. In the public sector, employees are being hit by the austerity agenda being demanded by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for governments to slash budget spending.

The SEP and IYSSE call on the working class, not only in the plantations, but throughout the country, to rally in defence of the victimised Deeside workers. Sri Lankan workers should turn to their class brothers and sisters internationally. It must be the first step in a political and industrial campaign of the working class as a whole, to defeat the austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights by employers and their government.

Such a campaign must be based on the program of international socialism and the fight for a workers' and peasants' government as part of a federation of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally. We call on workers to join and build the SEP as the mass socialist revolutionary party needed to lead this struggle.



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