

Support grows for victimised Sri Lankan tea estate workers

Our correspondents
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Last week a Hatton magistrate announced a November 8 hearing for the prosecution of seven victimised workers at the Deeside division of the Glenugie Estate, Maskeliya. The hearing is based on a complaint made by B. Abraham, a field supervisor, who accused the workers of physically attacking him.

The case is a frame up. The supervisor was encouraged to make the complaint by Glenugie management and area leadership of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main trade union in the plantations.

The Glenugie estate held a bogus internal inquiry from March 25 to April 25. Six plantation workers testified on behalf of victims, denying any physical attack on the supervisor and rejecting allegations that the accused had stoned a wasp nest to disrupt work at the estate. Only the supervisor and one worker gave “evidence” against the seven workers.

Management claimed, however, that the charges were “proven” and sacked three workers, including Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporter G. Wilfred, M. Nesturiyan and F. Franklin. They also suspended S. Duglasnuman, F. Anton Julian, S. Benedict and S. Janaratnam for one month. Glenugie management is now using the bogus charges in the forthcoming court case.

Workers denied the allegations at the Maskeliya reconciliation board on June 7 and requested immediate withdrawal of the charges. Field supervisor B. Abraham initially indicated that he was ready to do so but after contacting Glenugie management, reversed his offer, saying that he would face the same fate as the victimised workers if he withdrew the complaint.

Estate management is determined to punish the workers because they were actively involved in a strike at Deeside last February. The walkout was in

opposition to an increase in the daily tea-plucking target, from 16 kilos to 18 kilos. While the strike was sabotaged by the estate unions, management was forced to withdraw the two-kilo increase.

The witch-hunt is part of a broader assault being prepared by the plantation companies to drive up workloads and push down wages (see: “Sri Lankan plantation companies reject wage increase”). The Glenugie Estate is owned by the Maskeliya Plantation Company, one of the largest of the 22 regional plantation companies operating in Sri Lanka. According to its 2010–2011 annual report, the company employs about 15,000 workers.

Socialist Equality Party teams have campaigned in defence of the victimised workers in several estates during the past week, including at Glenugie’s Deeside and Glenugie divisions as well as the Scarborough division of the Stockholm Estate. Workers voiced anger over the management attack and endorsed the SEP’s defence campaign.

T. Chandrasegaran, 34, from the Scarborough division at Up-Cot, Maskeliya said: “We strongly support your campaign to unconditionally reinstate these workers. We know how they suffer without a job. Our wages are not enough to pay for our food but without work how can the victimised Deeside workers look after their children?”

“Like at Deeside, our estate management also increased our workload—from 15 to 18 kilos. The supervisors measure plucked tea leaves three times a day and each time they deduct 3 kilos for wastage. This means that they deduct 9 kilos per day, which means that we have to pick a total of 27 kilos per day. In the rainy season a deduction of one kilo for wastage is reasonable but that’s not what is happening here.”

Chandrasegaran said that his wife, who recently gave

birth, was forced to reach the new target. He pointed out that the trade unions had not opposed the increased workload.

“We should not be selfish,” he continued. “If other workers are affected by company repression then we have to defend them. Our trade union leaders only think about their own families and are not bothered about anyone else. They only think about their privileges.”

Mariyayee, joined the discussion, explaining that workers were living in extremely poor conditions with 11 people housed in one line room. Most of the workers have no toilets and although management previously assigned workers to clean up around the line rooms this had stopped.

Prabaharan, 32, explained that he had previously worked for the Manali Estate at Up-Cot but it did not have line-room accommodation and so came to Scarborough where he now works on a casual basis.

“It’s very difficult to live here,” he said. “There are no water facilities, the pavement is filled with mud and one side of our kitchen wall has collapsed. The government and the estate management have not provided us with any assistance to repair the building. The trade unions only come around during the elections. If they visit us I’m going to ask several questions. I agree that we have to break from trade unions and build a new leadership.”

Sashikumar from the Glenugie division estate explained that although workers had not participated in the Deeside division strike, management had been forced to reduce the newly introduced 18-kilo daily tea-plucking back to 16 kilos.

“We all are workers and we should defend each other. Companies are going to discuss the next collective agreement with the unions on July 2. Under the present situation we need new leadership. I quit the trade union because I was disgusted with the leaders.” Many other workers had withdrawn from unions for the same reason, he added.

Sashikumar asked why the SEP was not organising another union and listened carefully when SEP members explained that it was necessary to establish an Action Committee and mobilise broad sections of the working class. He said that he would discuss this further at the SEP’s forthcoming meeting.

Parameshwari said: “If we fight we’ll also face same the situation [as Deeside workers] so we have to

fight for all our fellow workers. Even though the government has changed we’ve not received any relief. The government said it would reduce prices but prices have gone up.” Parameshwari pointed out her roof-damaged house and dangerous electric wires. Fires are common in estate accommodation and she feared that a fire could breakout in her home.

Monogaran, a retired worker from Deeside estate, said, “I know [G].Wilfred and the other workers who were victimised. They are very good young workers and always in the forefront. They were victimised, not for some personal mistake, but because of their common fight for workers’ rights. Management is treating workers like slaves but the trade unions are doing nothing. I appeal to all workers come forward to defend the victimised workers. I’m very much supporting your campaign and will attend the SEP meeting on July 5 at Up-Cot.”

Nuraita, a young mother, said, “After our strike we faced lot of management harassment but we will not retreat from the fight. All workers must come forward to defend the penalised workers. The charges against the seven workers are completely false. I know that very well and gave evidence to defend them during the company inquiry. I support your campaign and will distribute your leaflets among other workers and come to the meeting.”

The Deeside witch-hunt is a flagrant violation of democratic rights, not just of the tea estate workers but the entire working class.

The SEP urges estate workers and other sections of the working class to support its defence campaign to reinstate the Deeside seven and attend the SEP public meeting this Sunday at the Up-Cot Dinesh Reception Hall (Janasathya Colony) at 2 p.m.



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