

Victimised Sri Lankan plantation workers speak to the WSWS

Our correspondents

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G. Wilfred, N. Nesturiyan and F. Franklin, three sacked workers from the Deeside division of the Glenugie Estate at Maskeliya in Sri Lanka's central hill district, spoke this week to the WSWS. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is waging a defence campaign against the victimisation of three sacked workers and another four who were suspended by Glenugie Estate management.

The witch hunt was initiated against the estate workers because of their role in a three-day strike by Deeside workers last February against an increase in tea plucking targets—from 16 kilograms to 18 kilograms per day for each worker—without extra pay.

While the walkout forced the estate to reverse the increased production target, management began harassing the workers. Estate management and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) area leadership encouraged a field officer, B. Abraham, to make a false complaint to the police claiming that the workers had physically attacked him. Management then held its own bogus inquiry and penalised the seven workers. Although the field officer has since indicated that he was willing to withdraw the false charges, this has been opposed by management and a court trial will be held on November 8.

SEP supporter **G. Wilfred** is 35 years old and married with two children. He has been working at the estate for 15 years. His parents were also estate workers but are now retired.

“Our struggle in Deeside estate is a lesson for plantation workers and other sections of the working class. Seven workers, including myself, were victimised on the basis of fabricated charges because we were active in the strike against the workload increase. This is a planned attack by the estate management, the plantation company and the trade

unions. The CWC local leaders were directly involved in this attack.”

Wilfred explained that the plantation companies had rejected any wage increase in recent discussions with the unions. “The plantation employer's federation president Roshan Rajadurai has said that in order for the companies to maintain their profits the workers must pluck 23 kilos of tea leaves a day. Our struggle is directly against this plan and that's why we have been victimised—it is a warning by the employers against other workers. This means that plantation employees and other workers must come forward to defend their rights.”

Wilfred pointed out that the government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse had used the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to attack workers' rights. “Many promises were made by President Maithripala Sirisena during his election campaign but nothing has been done after he came to power,” he added.

Wilfred said he agreed with the SEP's program because it provided the working class with political direction. He emphasised the party's call for workers to break from the unions and form action committees to defend their rights. “I'm convinced that workers can only win a decent life under a socialist government,” he said.

N. Nesturiyan, 24, who has worked at the estate for five years, said that the charges against the sacked workers were fabricated and that they have enough witnesses to prove it.

“I was terminated on the basis of false charges. Several of our co-workers courageously came forward to expose these charges during the plantation company's domestic inquiry. This is a planned revenge by the company and so the evidence was ignored,” he

said.

“We went on strike because we face intolerable living conditions. Our wages are even not enough to pay for our food. Most of the workers do not have proper toilet or water facilities and there is not enough accommodation for workers, forcing two or three families to live in one home. The trade unions are not fighting for workers’ rights but collaborate with management.”

F. Franklin, 27, who is married with one child, has been working at the estate for five years. “We went on strike without informing the trade unions. The trade unions make false promises and use this to recruit members but then they team up with management against the workers. I’ve learnt a lot about the unions through our struggles. In our estate the CWC leadership openly works with management against the workers. The CWC leaders have told us that if we join their union they will make arrangements to get our jobs back. Other unions claim that they support our fight but they have cheated us.”

Franklin called on all workers to back the campaign for the withdrawal of all the frame-up charges and for the reinstatement of the victimised workers. The SEP is holding a public meeting this Sunday to defend the estate workers. The meeting is at the Up-Cot Dinesh Reception Hall (Janasathya Colony) at 2 p.m.



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