

Sri Lanka: SEP meeting defends victimised plantation workers

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a successful public meeting in the central hills town of Upcot on July 5 to defend victimised workers from the Deeside division of the Glenugie tea plantation. A considerable number of plantation workers, including those victimised, attended the meeting in defiance of ongoing intimidation by plantation union officials and local police.

On May 22, Glenugie plantation management sacked three workers and suspended four others for a month on the basis of bogus claims that they had attacked a field officer and stirred up a wasp nest to disrupt tea-plucking. The workers were targeted for playing a leading role in a three-day strike in February against an arbitrary increase in workloads. Charges based on management's frame-up allegations were also filed at the Hatton Magistrates Court.

In the lead up to last weekend's public meeting SEP and IYSSE members campaigned in several estates, distributing copies of an SEP statement, "Reinstate victimised Deeside plantation workers."

On July 3, a regional leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), a major trade union in the plantation sector, attempted to disrupt an SEP campaign in Maskeliya. The CWC official accused the SEP of "exploiting the issue to gain votes during the election period" and threatened to stop the campaign. After SEP members spoke to passersby, explaining the party's struggle to defend the victimised workers and exposing how the union had assisted Glenugie management, the CWC leader retreated.

The next day, SEP campaigners were approached by the Officer-In-Charge (OIC) of the Maskeliya police station. After reading an SEP leaflet, he told the SEP supporters to stop the campaign, claiming that "somebody" had complained, and ordered them to come to the police

station.

While the SEP campaign team leader was talking to the OIC, a thug from the National Union of Workers (NUW), the union led by cabinet minister P. Digambaram, attempted to assault other SEP members.

As SEP members walked towards the police station, they were followed by a group of NUW members who attempted to seize copies of the SEP statement. Police failed to stop this open intimidation or arrest the union thugs. The NUW members openly threatened the SEP campaigners and ordered them not to publish anything against their union officials in the future. While the SEP lodged an official complaint with the police, no action was taken against the NUW members.

The two incidents further highlight the political desperation of the unions and the close relations between the unions and the police.

Chairing the July 5 public meeting, SEP member K. Kantheepan welcomed all those in attendance and in particular the decision of tea plantation workers to defend their colleagues and defy the threats of the union bureaucracy and the police.

"Deeside workers were victimised on false charges because they were in the forefront of the fight against increased workloads by the plantation company. This is not an isolated decision of Glenugie management," Kantheepan said.

"Workers must understand that this is a calculated decision by the capitalist class and the Planters' Association in particular. They declare that they cannot increase workers' wages by a single rupee and insists that the tea-plucking rate be increased from 16 or 18 kg to 23 kg per day."

Kantheepan said the lessons of the Deeside struggle were important for the international working class and appealed to those in attendance to take forward the defence campaign and force the withdrawal of all

punishment against the victimised workers.

SEP political committee member M. Devarajah explained that the Deeside workers were being witch-hunted because they had directly opposed the plans of the plantation companies. The plantations want to drive up productivity and decrease the cost of production in order to compete with other tea-producing countries in the world market, he said.

“Workers are facing the same attacks all over the world. This situation is sharply expressed in Greece. The European Union, European Central Bank and IMF are attempting to impose the burden of the world financial crisis on the working class and are demanding further cuts in wages, pensions and welfare on Greek workers.”

Devarajah recalled the principled struggle waged by the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India among Sri Lankan plantation workers. “In the 1940s, workers at the Mulloya Estate in Kandy and the Wewessa Estate in Badulla were in the forefront of the struggle against the British colonial government and the planters based on an international socialist program. The SEP is fighting to build a mass socialist movement based on these lessons,” Devarajah said.

The last speaker, SEP political committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena, explained how plantation management, the unions, the police and the judiciary worked in unison against workers. “The whole capitalist establishment has operated as an integrated unit to victimise these workers. President Maithreepala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe fully support these attacks.”

“What occurred at the Deeside division is a rehearsal for broader attacks by the government and the private companies against all sections of the working class. Workers in private and state sectors confront the same incessant demand for increased productivity while wages and jobs are slashed to boost declining profits.”

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

“This 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.”

Wijesiriwardena explained that the SEP would be running candidates in the Colombo, Jaffna and Nuwara

Eliya districts in the forthcoming parliamentary elections to build an international working-class movement against the danger of imperialist war and social counter revolution. He urged plantation workers to support this campaign and for all those who agreed with the SEP’s program to join the SEP.

One worker asked the SEP’s attitude towards the CWC’s “Go Slow” campaign for 1,000-rupee daily wage.

Wijesiriwardena replied by explaining that the CWC’s limited protest action had been called to dissipate the growing unrest amongst plantation workers over the worsening conditions. The unions and the employers had been shocked by the anger and radicalisation of the plantation workers and were attempting to suppress it. The SEP speaker said that the CWC were also seeking to exploit workers’ discontent and boost the union’s sagging base.

Another plantation worker asked, “Should we take part in this go-slow or not?”

Wijesiriwardena said that plantation workers should participate in the action but “not give one iota of support” to the CWC or other unions.

“The SEP says that for workers to win their demands for a wage increase and better conditions they cannot rely on the unions but must make their own initiatives. The unions have a long record of betrayal and working hand-in-glove with the capitalist governments and the companies.

“Workers must build their own action committees in every estate and expand the fight beyond limited protests and take strike action to demand a decent monthly wage, housing education and health facilities, whilst appealing for support from workers throughout Sri Lanka and internationally.

“Fighting for these demands must be developed as part of a political struggle against the capitalist system and be based on socialist program,” Wijesiriwardena told the meeting.



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