

Witch-hunt continues against Sri Lankan tea estate workers

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Ingestre tea estate at Dickoya in Sri Lanka's central hills has suspended seven workers previously involved in a union "go-slow" wage campaign. The workers were told by an assistant superintendent on Tuesday that management would only consider re-employing them after an inquiry by a company lawyer.

The low-paid tea estate workers were arrested and remanded by the police on July 20, following false management claims that they had threatened an estate manager and damaged a garden at his residence. They were bailed on Monday, after a 100,000-rupee personal guarantee from each worker. The magistrate warned them not to engage in any "unlawful activities" and "disturbances." The case will be heard on September 21.

The victimised workers are: Ganeshan Sivakumar, Ganeshan Pushpanathan, Marimuthu Yohendran, Govinthan Lechumanan, Sanhilimuthu Sangaran, Sivasamy Mahedran and Perumal Murugan. Mahedran is the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) branch president at the estate and Murugan a CWC district leader.

The workers were witch-hunted after the CWC, the main plantation union, called off the "go slow" industrial action on July 16, only 10 days after it had begun. Almost 200,000 workers were involved in the campaign for a 1,000-rupee daily wage. The CWC ordered an end to all action, following a collapse in talks with Ceylon Employers Federation, which represents 22 plantation companies. The CWC leadership claimed they would resume the pay negotiations after the August 17 general election. The companies have provocatively offered a miserable 80-rupee increase on the current 620-rupee daily wage.

On July 18, Ingestre workers resumed the industrial campaign in defiance of the CWC leadership and were

joined by tea plantation workers at Trillery, Sinharamlai and Wanakadu.

Ingestre management retaliated by refusing to accept plucked tea leaves and then called police commandos to intimidate the protesting workers. The following day seven workers in the forefront of the industrial campaign were arrested.

Govinthan Lechumanan, one of the suspended workers, told the WWS: "We were bailed out on Monday. The next morning we went to work but management refused to give us any work. The assistant superintendent came to the field and said that estate management said that the seven workers remanded by the police should not be given work. He told us that after an inquiry by a lawyer, the company would consider to giving us work."

Estate workers have angrily denounced the management's actions. One plantation worker said: "We are ready to launch a strike to defend the victimised workers. All workers in the plantation and other sectors must support us. They came forward to fight for wages of all workers. We opposed the CWC postponing our wage struggle under the pretext of the election.

"If we are victimised, it will affect all other workers. While we're members of different unions—the CWC, the NUW [National Union of Workers] and the UPF [Upcountry People's Front]—we are united in the fight for better wages. It's the trade union leaders who are dividing workers."

CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman, a minister in the previous Rajapakse government, called the "go-slow" campaign in order to dissipate mounting anger over low wages. The other plantation unions, the NUW, the UPF and the Democratic People's Front, led by Mano Ganeshan, opposed the industrial campaign.

NUW and UPF leaders P. Digambaram and V. Radhakrishnan are ministers in the current United National Party (UNP)-led government.

The witch-hunt of Ingestre workers is part of an onslaught by the plantation companies who want higher productivity with no real wage increases. It follows the victimisation of Deeside division workers from Glenugie estate at Upcot in February.

The Deeside workers struck in February in opposition to increased productivity demands. After the company was forced to revert to old production targets, management sacked three workers and suspended another four for one month on false charges. They are facing a court case filed by management against them.

The conditions for these attacks have been created by the plantation unions who work hand-in-glove with the giant corporations that control the industry.

The Planters' Association of Ceylon chief, Roshan Rajadurai, has repeatedly called for each worker to pluck 25 kilograms of tea per day. The current target is between 16 to 18 kilograms.

The world tea industry is in crisis following lower demand from the Middle East and Russia. Tensions generated by the US-led military intervention in Iraq and Syria have impacted on exports to the Middle East while Russian demand has fallen due to trade sanctions imposed by the US and its allies. Sri Lankan tea exports fell 12 percent in May, the eighth consecutive monthly decline.

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