

Sri Lankan plantation workers sacked for demanding wage rise

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The management of Ingestre Estate at Dickoya in Sri Lanka's central plantation district has refused to reinstate seven workers sacked last month on false charges. The management told the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) trade union leaders on November 19 they could only appeal to the estate owners, the Kelani Valley Plantation Company, in Colombo on November 30.

The attack on the Ingestre workers is a clear demonstration of how the plantation companies are ruthlessly seeking to suppress the resistance of workers in order to impose the burden of a global downturn in tea prices and demand.

The management's decision came despite nearly 1,500 workers from six divisions of Ingestre Estate calling a strike on November 13 for two days, and organising a sit-in-protest against the seven sackings. The management also called the police to the estate from the Norwood and Hatton stations to intimidate workers.

The CWC Dickoya area leader Thangarajah Kishore denounced workers for going on strike and compelled them to halt the action, promising that a deal would be reached with the management to reinstate the victimised workers. After sabotaging the struggle to defend the workers, the CWC then asked workers to hope for mercy from the owners.

Most of the Ingestre Estate workers are members of CWC, while the National Union of Workers (NUW) and Up-country People's Front (UPF) also operate in the estate.

The victimised workers are: Ganeshan Sivakumar, Ganeshan Puspanathan, Marimuthu Yohendran, Govinthan Lechumanan, Sangilimuthu Sangaran, Sivasamy Mahendran and Perumal Murugan.

The witch-hunt against the Ingestre workers began in

July. They participated in a limited go-slow campaign called by the CWC in plantation areas demanding a 1,000-rupee daily wage, including allowances. The Planters' Association rejected the demand, but the CWC called off the industrial action, using the August parliamentary elections as a pretext, promising to resume the campaign later.

While the Ingestre workers continued the go-slow campaign, management provocatively refused to accept their plucked tea. When workers dumped the harvest near the manager's bungalow, they were falsely accused of threatening an estate manager and damaging a garden at his residence.

The seven workers, who were in the forefront of the go-slow campaign, were arrested on July 20 and remanded for one week. They were finally bailed out, on a 100,000-rupee personal surety each, at the Hatton magistrates court. The next hearing date for their charges was fixed for March 28 next year.

After the bailout, the management suspended the seven workers and started a so-called internal inquiry. More than 60 workers gave evidence, defending their colleagues and exposing the trumped-up charges, but the management arbitrarily sacked the workers on November 6.

These victimisations underscore a new turn by the plantation companies to use repressive methods against workers. There was a similar incident earlier this year. After workers at the Deeside division of the Glenugie estate, owned by Maskeliya Plantations, went on strike against increased workloads in February, management set up a provocation and had eight workers arrested on false charges of physically attacking a field supervisor.

When a magistrate bailed out the eight workers, the management began its own inquiry and sacked three workers and suspended four. The sacked workers were

reinstated only after NUW leaders pressured them into offering an apology for offences they did not commit.

Facing an export slump, the plantation companies have refused to increase wages, even though the collective agreement expired in March. With the support of President Maithripala Sirisena's government and the trade unions, the companies are contemplating various schemes to extract greater workloads from workers.

Sri Lankan tea exports and prices have fallen owing to a drop in demand in key markets, especially in the Middle East and Russia. Overall export earnings from tea fell by 700 million rupees in October 2015 to 16.8 billion rupees from the year before. The US-led military intervention in Iraq and Syria has cut exports to the Middle East and Russian demand has fallen because of trade sanctions imposed by the US and its allies.

While accusing each other of cheating workers, the trade union leaders are working with the companies and the government behind the scenes to facilitate these attacks.

CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman was a minister in the government of previous President Mahinda Rajapakse. His union called the go-slow campaign in order to deflect growing opposition among workers over falling real wages and deteriorating living and social conditions. Thondaman has since dropped the demand for a 1,000-rupee (\$US7) daily wage.

The other unions are condemning Thondaman for supposedly proposing an unrealistic demand in the first place.

The leaders of the NUW, UPF and another plantation union, the Democratic People's Front (DPF), P. Digambaram, V. Radhakrishnan and Mano Ganeshan respectively, are ministers in the present government. They promised to seek wage rises after the August parliamentary election, but then denounced Thondaman for asking too much.

Thus, in toto, the unions have taken the side of the plantation companies and are acting as industrial police forces in opposing workers' attempts to challenge their degrading conditions.

Victimised worker Govinthan Lechumanan told the WSWs: "A dangerous situation is developing in the plantations. The companies adamantly refuse to give wage increases to us. The trade unions are not talking

about a wage increase. The company started to attack us because we campaigned for wage increases and no higher workloads.

"Since our suspension from work, the management has started to give only half the daily wage to those workers who are unable to reach an 18-kilogram daily tea plucking target. Last month, several workers who plucked less than 14 kilograms per day got only half a wage.

"Earlier, if we worked on a Sunday, the company was liable to pay a wage equivalent to one and half days. Now, the management has stopped that and started to pay just a normal daily wage."

Lechumanan condemned the media for not reporting the victimisation of the Ingestre Estate workers. He said he showed a copy of the WSWs report on their arrest to other media outlets but they ignored it.

Marimuthu Yohendran, another victimised worker, commented: "After the company terminated our jobs, we informed Minister P. Digambaram and UPF leader V. Radhakrishnan. They promised to come to the estate to meet us but did not turn up. One reporter came from Bogawanthalawa and got the details on our victimisation but we know he was under pressure not to report the story." Yohendran condemned the Tamil-language electronic media for not reporting on the victimisation of the workers.

S. Silampayee, 74, the mother of Sangilimuthu Sangaran, explained the impact of her son's dismissal. "I have been compelled to take casual work in the estate to look after my grandchildren," she said. "My son lost his job and my daughter-in-law is sick and unable to go to work. Even my husband, who is 84 years old, is still working, cutting grass for cows, to earn some money to save our lives. Actually we are living as if our lives have been mortgaged. The plantation management is not treating us as people."



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