

Sri Lankan SEP and workers' action committee oppose attacks on plantation workers

Our correspondent
28 December 2016

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Deeside Workers Action Committee (DWAC) held an important public meeting on December 18 at the Hindu Cultural Hall in Upcot in Sri Lanka's central plantation district.

The event, which was attended by plantation workers, teachers and youth, was called to discuss the recent collective agreement between the plantation unions and employers. The agreement is a fundamental attack on this key section of the Sri Lankan working class—over 200,000 people—undermining hard won gains and opening the way for the future transformation of plantation workers into share croppers.

SEP and DWAC members campaigned extensively among plantation workers and youth in the Upcot and Maskeliya areas in the days prior to the meeting. Thousands of copies of the WSWs article “Sri Lankan unions agree to impose share-cropper system on plantation workers” exposing the union-employers' deal were distributed.

A worker from Brownswick estate in Maskeliya told WSWs reporters: “All the unions have collaborated with management to impose increased workloads on us. Although unions said our daily wages would be increased up to 730 rupees, we now realise this was a lie and not paid to those who failed to reach the daily tea plucking target of 18 kilograms. That target was increased from 16 kilograms two years ago with the collaboration of unions.

A worker from Alton estate said that estate management had stopped maintaining workers' line rooms, the drainage systems and other basic facilities. “What the SEP says is correct,” he said. “All unions have betrayed us and so we are not voting for any of them in the future.

“This new [proposed share-cropping] system will impose real burdens because our work fields are located some distance from our homes, in some cases a few kilometres away. How can we maintain tea bushes assigned to us under those conditions? We will also have to protect these fields in the night.”

Chairing the December 18 public meeting, K. Kantheepan, a member of the SEP and the DWAC, said that the event was a significant turning point in the fight to defend plantation workers' rights.

“The workers have revolted against the unions which betrayed their wage struggle and imposed a collective agreement that has increased daily work targets and implemented a new wage system tied to productivity.

“In deciding to build an action committee,” Kantheepan said, “Deeside workers have given conscious political expression to this rebellion against the unions and provided a way forward for an independent movement of the working class to defend their jobs, wages and working conditions.”

Kapila Fernando, convenor of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the SEP's youth movement, told the meeting that working people and youth could not win their democratic and social rights without a struggle against the capitalist profit system.

“The trade unions, along with the Inter University Student Federation, which dominates student struggles, are falsely claiming that workers and students can gain their rights by exerting pressure on the government ...

“In every country, the ruling elites are attacking the jobs and living conditions of the working class and cutting social facilities such as education and health that were won through decades of bitter struggle.”

Fernando noted that plantation workers and youths are deprived of the most basic health facilities and said: “Only very small numbers of students from the plantations sit for ordinary and advance level [university entrance] exams. It is very rare for plantation workers' children to attend university.” The speaker said that the trade unions and the student unions had abandoned any fight for those basic social rights and urged youth attending the meeting to join IYSSE.

Addressing the gathering, a female worker and a DWAC member reviewed the difficult social conditions confronting

Deeside tea estate employees. “The workers live in old line rooms without basic amenities, including sufficient numbers of toilets and water outlets. Our monthly income is not enough to manage our expenses because prices are skyrocketing and it is difficult to provide a proper education for our children,” she explained.

“The trade unions betrayed our wage struggle and now estate management has increased daily tea-plucking targets by two kilograms. I decided to join the action committee because of these conditions,” the speaker said, and appealed to other plantation workers to build action committees in their respective estates.

SEP political committee member M. Thevarajah told the meeting that the formation of an action committee at the Deeside estate was a result of the SEP’s support for the Deeside workers and their struggle against company demands for increased productivity and estate management attacks on democratic rights (see: “Sri Lanka: Reinstate victimised Deeside plantation workers!”).

Thevarajah explained how Deeside management and the police, with the collaboration of the unions, witch-hunted Deeside workers who took the initiative to fight the increased workloads. “Only the SEP fought to defend the Deeside workers while the unions shamelessly revealed themselves as agents of the plantation companies and the government,” Thevarajah said.

The speaker said that the attacks on the Deeside workers were part of a global social counterrevolution against the working class in every country by international finance capital.

“The tea and rubber industries are in a severe crisis with a continuous decline in export incomes and competition accelerating between all tea-producing countries. That is why plantation companies in Sri Lanka have decided to bring about a productivity-based wage system to cut costs.

“The collective agreement signed in October is a prelude to implementation of this system. The trade unions have conspired with the companies and the government to impose this on estate workers,” he said.

Thevarajah explained how the government was attempting to off-load Sri Lanka’s deepening economic crisis onto the backs of the working class.

“In line with the economic reforms dictated by the International Monetary Fund, the government has decided to restructure the plantation sector, destroying tens of thousands of jobs. It will brutally suppress workers’ opposition to those measures.

“The unprecedented level of state repression unleashed by the government against the recent strike of Hambantota port workers for defending their jobs is warning to the whole working class,” the speaker said.

Thevarajah told the meeting the Sri Lankan government had lined up behind Washington’s imperialist war plans against China and that the election of Donald Trump as US president increased the danger of a third world war. Such a war, he continued, would involve nuclear weapons and be catastrophic for mankind.

“The international working class,” he said, “is the only force that can prevent such a disaster through the building of an international anti-war movement based on an international socialist program. Only the International Committee of the Fourth International and its Internet organ, the *World Socialist Web Site*, are fighting to build such a movement.”

Thevarajah explained that Sri Lankan workers could only defend their rights as part of the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist policies. Such a government, he continued, would place the basic industries, including the plantations, under workers’ control.

This struggle, he concluded, had to be part of a broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally and appealed to all those at the meeting to join the SEP and build it as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.

A lively question and answer session followed the main speakers. A female worker from Alton estate in Upcot agreed with the necessity to form workers’ action committees. She told the meeting that nearly 40 workers had left the unions at her estate after the recent wage struggle but, under immense pressure’ had rejoined the unions. She asked how workers could be protected from this coercion.

SEP and DWAC speakers explained that the only way to combat this pressure was by explaining the record of the unions and actively organising workers as an independent political force on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective. The purpose of building action committees was to educate workers in this political struggle, the speakers said.

A teacher asked why the speakers paid more attention to international issues rather than the immediate problems of plantation workers. Thevarajah explained that the working class was an international class and could not build a political movement to fight defend its rights within one country and without an understanding of world economy and world politics.



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