# Sri Lankan workers must oppose the witch-hunt of militant plantation workers

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Plantation managers in Sri Lanka, with the support of the government and the trade unions, are witch-hunting worker activists involved in industrial action to demand higher wages.

On January 10, the assistant manager of the Abbotsleigh estate near Hatton threatened P. Suntharalingam, president of a workers' action committee on the estate. The threat follows last month's suspension of S. Balasubramaniyam and police charges against him and several other Annfield estate workers because they participated in protests during last month's national walkout.

In December, 100,000 plantation workers, with the support of estate teachers, small traders and other sections of the working class, struck indefinitely to demand their daily wage be increased from 500 to 1,000 rupees.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) shut down the strike after nine days, claiming that President Maithripala Sirisena had promised to resolve the wage dispute. The trade unions have collaborated for decades with plantation management to contain estate workers' wage demands and eliminate hard-won working conditions.

Last week, during the pay day on January 10, an assistant manager at the Abbotsleigh estate publicly threatened Suntharalingam, in front of some 200 workers. "You have made trouble in the estate by forming a committee," he declared, "and I will take action against you."

The assistant manager had a *World Socialist Web Site* article on the establishment of a workers' action committee at the estate displayed on his smart phone. It contained a picture of Suntharalingam presiding over the committee's inaugural meeting.

The Abbotsleigh estate's Hatton plantation employs about 700 workers and is located five kilometres from Hatton town. Like thousands of plantation workers in Sri Lanka many of those at Abbotsleigh are casual employees and are paid only 500 rupees per day or 30 rupees per kilogram of tea leaves.

The Abbotsleigh workers' action committee was established during the December national strike and under the guidance of the Socialist Equality Party.

The decision by Abbotsleigh workers to form their own committee, independent of the unions, is a basic democratic right, and the only way in which they can defend and improve the working conditions and living standards. Suntharalingam has been targeted because he has taken a principled and courageous stand.

The same Abbotsleigh assistant manager previously threatened a female worker after she gave an interview to the WSWS, explaining the harsh working conditions on the estate and the political betrayals of the unions.

On December 13, plantation management suspended Balasubramaniyam, a worker at the St. Leys division of the Annfield estate at Dickoya who leads the CWC's branch there.

Following complaints by the estate management, police charged Balasubramaniyam and three other workers—Krishnan, Pathmanathan and Subramaniyam—over allegations that they had locked the estate factory gate and prevented trucks loaded with tea leaves from entering on December 5.

Three other workers—Arunalya, Gilera and Sivasamy, who are CWC representatives at the same estate—have been also charged because they were present when the incident is alleged to have occurred.

The management of the Gourawela estate in Upcot, which is situated about 20 kilometres from Hatton, also attempted to victimise several worker activists but backed off when this was angrily opposed by fellow

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workers.

These attacks are not isolated, or accidental, but part of a well-orchestrated attempt by management, with the backing of the government, police and the plantation unions, to intimidate estate workers and suppress their wage demands. The CWC leadership has said it will defend the victimised local officials and workers at Annfield estate in court but rejected organising any industrial action to defeat the frame-up charges.

The other plantation unions are totally silent over management attacks on these workers. They know full well that any call for action to defend the victimised workers will win widespread support throughout the plantations and be endorsed by other sections of the working class.

The Tamil Progressive Front (TPF), which includes the National Union of Workers (NUW) led by P. Digambaram, the Up Country People's Front (UPF) headed by V. Radhakrishnan, and the Democratic People's Front (DPF) led by Mano Ganeshan initially opposed the December strike by CWC members. Thousands of members of these unions defied their leaderships and joined the national walkout.

Digambaram, Radhakrishnan and Ganeshan are all ministers in the United National Front-led government. The CWC's main leader Arumugam Thondaman was a minister in the previous administration.

Notwithstanding the bogus claims that President Sirisena would "resolve" the plantation workers' wage dispute, the employers and the government have rejected a 1,000-rupee basic daily wage, claiming this would collapse the plantation industry. The government has suggested a three-year wage formula to end the dispute—a 125-rupee increase in the first year and a 25-rupee rise in each of the following two years.

While "rejecting" this proposal, the unions are continuing their negotiations in order to reach a sell-out agreement with the plantation bosses as soon as possible. The deal is likely to include the introduction of the hated revenue sharing plan, which would abolish the present wage system and limited social rights, and transform workers to share croppers.

The witch-hunting of militant estate workers is a warning to all sections of the Sri Lankan working class. Workers must oppose management threats against Suntharalingam, demand the full and unconditional reinstatement of suspended worker Balasubramaniyam, and the dropping of police charges against all Annfield estate workers.

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