

Sri Lanka: SEP and Abbotsleigh workers' committee organise picket to oppose witch hunt in plantations

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee have organised a joint picket near the central bus stand in Hatton town in central hills district on February 17 to oppose the witch-hunt of plantation worker activists.

On December 13, amid the struggle of plantation workers for higher wages, the management of Annfield Estate at Dickoya suspended S. Balasubramaniam, a worker and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) branch leader at the St. Leys division of that estate.

The management accused Balasubramaniam and three other workers, Pathmanathan, Subramaniam and Krishnan, of blocking the gate to the estate factory and preventing the transport of tea leaves inside. Pathmanathan is the local leader of the CWC branch at the Stamford division of the Annfield estate.

The management also formally complained to the police against these workers and three CWC officials, Arulnayahi, Clera and Sivasami, saying they were also present when the incident took place.

After taking statements from these individuals, the police said that charges would be filed against them in the courts.

In an inquiry by an assistant labour commissioner into a complaint against the company's suspension of Balasubramaniam, the estate manager accused him of causing a loss of 700,000 rupees (nearly \$US4,000) by blocking transportation of the tea leaves.

Balasubramaniam and the other activists have rejected the accusations made by management.

Such threats, intimidation and witch-hunting were widespread in the plantations during the estate workers' struggle for better wages.

In early January, an assistant manager of the

Abbotsleigh estate warned the president of the workers' action committee, P. Suntharalingam, over his activities. In front of other workers, the assistant manager told Suntharalingam: "You have made trouble in the estate by forming the committee. I will take action against you."

These repressive acts on the part of plantation management, with the backing of the government and police, are aimed at intimidating workers who launched a determined struggle for a 100 percent increase in their daily basic wage, which is currently just 500 rupees (\$US2.80).

More than 100,000 workers launched an indefinite strike from December 5 to press their demand for a wage rise. The strike was called off by the CWC after nine days, with the backing of other unions, citing a false promise by President Maithripala Sirisena to "solve" the wage issue.

On January 28, the CWC together with Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union signed a sellout agreement with the Employers Federation of Ceylon, limiting the basic gross daily wage to 750 rupees, and ending other bonuses.

Workers have expressed broad opposition to the agreement by launching strikes and protests. Now, the leaders of the National Union of Workers, Democratic People's Front, Upcountry People's Front and Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre have begun futile discussions with the government and companies in a bid to defuse workers' opposition. Companies have already rejected any further increase.

The witch-hunt in the tea estates is not isolated. In recent struggles, the police and security forces have been unleashed against workers at the Hambantota

harbour, Ceylon Electricity Board, and in the petroleum sector and railways. Workers at the British-owned ATG factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) are currently on strike to demand the reinstatement of six suspended workers. Similar repressive action has taken place in other countries amid an upsurge of workers' struggles internationally.

The CWC has refused to mobilise its industrial strength to defend Balasubramaniam and other activists. All the other trade unions are completely silent about these attacks on democratic rights. Unions are not defending workers, but are in the service of government and big business.

The SEP and Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee, in issuing the call for the February 17 picket, have explained that the fight against the witch-hunt in the plantations is inseparable from the struggle to defend democratic and social rights of all workers from the onslaught of the capitalist class and its government. These rights can only be secured in the fight for socialism.



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