

Sri Lankan tea plantation workers protest victimisations

Our reporters
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Sri Lankan tea estate workers held a powerful rally on Sunday against the witch-hunting of militant workers by plantation companies and government attacks on other sections the working class. The protest was organised by the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee (AEWAC) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and held at Hatton town in the central hills district.

The Action Committee was established in December under the guidance of the SEP amid the unions' betrayal of a nine-day strike by estate workers for a 1,000-rupee (\$US5.60) daily basic wage. Their current daily basic wage is just 500 rupees. There is widespread opposition by plantation workers over the recent sell-out agreement signed by the unions with the companies and with the blessing of the Sri Lankan government.

Plantation workers, youth, students and other workers from the Hatton area, along with SEP members, participated in Sunday's protest, which was held near the central bus stand. Sunday is the only day off for plantation workers and so hundreds from nearby estates come into the town to shop. Many workers lined the roadside, enthusiastically listening to the speeches delivered at the lively rally.

National television channels, including ITN and Sirasa, covered the event and *Veerakesari*, the leading Tamil-language newspaper published a report with photographs in its online edition. Shakthi TV, which is connected to Sirasa, also screened some brief video footage and a voice clip from SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah.

Demonstrators demanded the plantation companies and the government immediately end the vicious witch-hunting of militant plantation workers. S. Balasubramaniam, a worker and a Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) branch leader at Annfield Estate has

been suspended by the management. He and several other workers and union officials are to be charged by the police following frame-up allegations against them by the company.

Protestors chanted: "Stop the witch-hunt of workers," "No to the unions, no to underhand agreements," "Down with the unions, down with their betrayals."

Drawing the link between their daily grievances and the need for an international socialist program, they also chanted: "Fight for international socialism. Fight for a government of workers and peasants. Oppose world war."

AEWAC and SEP campaigners won strong support from plantation workers in the lead-up to Sunday's protest.

S. Rajendran, who now works as a security officer in Colombo, told the WSWWS that he was victimised and lost his job as an estate worker in 2011 following a frame-up by the management.

The real reason, for his dismissal, he explained, was because he protested the unjust working conditions. Rather than defend him, the National Union of Workers (NUW) tried to engage him in a futile legal battle with the company.

"Why should we pay dues to the unions if they forsake us for the benefit of the companies? Balasubramaniam has met the same fate today because the unions support the companies," he said.

A female worker from the Annfield Estate supported the protest and told WSWWS reporters that plantation workers have been betrayed by the unions and the political parties for many years.

"We must oppose the victimisation of Balasubramaniam," she said. "My husband, who works on a construction site in Colombo, is also joining the demonstration. We agree that all the workers in our

estate and in this country and worldwide should unite to fight for their rights.”

Workers attending Sunday’s demonstration came despite the NUW’s efforts to sabotage the event. The NUW is a partner in the current Sri Lankan government with the union’s leader, P. Digambaram, holding a ministerial position.

Workers supporting the Action Committee have also been threatened by an NUW local leader known as Munnusamy. He personally visited plantation workers’ line room homes and warned workers that they should be prepared to “face the consequences” if they maintained contact with the Socialist Equality Party.

Addressing the rally, Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee president P. Suntharalingam, said that Balasubramaniam had been targeted at the Annfield Estate “because he has been at the forefront of the struggle. The workers must be united to defend him.”

Suntharalingam told the crowd that the recent collective agreement between the unions and companies was a betrayal of plantation workers and they should oppose it. “It’s less than a month since this agreement was signed and yet the workloads of individual workers are being increased.”

The treachery of the unions, he continued, fully vindicates the decision of Abbotsleigh workers to establish an action committee. “Sunday’s daily target has increased to 35 kilograms or 40 kilograms but the payment for this remains fixed. And female workers also have to weed the ground before they begin their daily tea-plucking routine.”

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah told the protest that the collaboration of estate management with the unions and the police against Balasubramaniam was another sign of the growing use of authoritarian methods against the working class. “This is a threat and a warning not only to estate workers but to the entire working class,” he said.

Pani Wijesiriwardena, another SEP Political Committee member, explained that the witch-hunting of Sri Lankan plantation workers is part of a broader global attack by the ruling classes in every country as millions of workers come into struggle over wages and conditions and to defend their democratic rights.

“About 70,000 workers in Matamoros, Mexico are on strike defying their pro-capitalist unions. Millions of

workers in India and thousands of workers in the United States have been on strikes. They are all facing the same attacks as the plantation workers here,” he said.

Wijesiriwardena called on all plantation workers to resolutely reject the treachery of the unions and to follow the example of Abbotsleigh Estate and establish their own action committees. “Take the fight for your rights into your own hands. Fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government as part of the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam and international socialism.”

Workers who attended the protest expressed their agreement with the Abbotsleigh Workers Action Committee and the SEP’s program of political struggle.

Ashogan from the Invery Estate said: “I learnt from your campaign in previous days that the SEP is the only party fighting against the companies’ victimisation of estate workers. We have to unite and build the SEP as a mass party of the working class.”

Balasingham, a restaurant worker, said: “I’m struggling to sustain my family on a daily wage of 1,000 rupees but plantation workers don’t even receive that amount. Workers face the same issues everywhere. I support the plantation workers’ struggle and will join and assist them in their fight.”

The strong response to Sunday’s protest indicates that important layers of plantation workers are coming to understand that there is no solution to their problems within the framework of capitalism. Many are beginning to recognise that they must break from the unions and organise as an independent political force.

The SEP and the Action Committee call on plantation workers and other sections of the working class, along with students, youth and intellectuals, to attend the forthcoming Workers’ Conference at Hatton Town Hall on March 17. Entitled “The lessons of the plantation workers struggle and the way forward to win wages and social rights,” the event will provide the framework for a detailed discussion on these crucial questions.



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