

Demand the unconditional reinstatement of Sri Lankan plantation worker S. Balasubramaniam!

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S. Balasubramaniam, a worker from Annfield estate at Dickoya in Nuwara-Eliya district, was sacked by management on February 27 over his active involvement in the recent plantation workers' wage struggle.

Workers and youth must oppose the victimisation of Balasubramaniam and demand his immediate and unconditional reinstatement. His sacking is an attack on the democratic rights of all working people and plantation workers in particular, who are demanding a 1,000-rupee (\$US5.50), or 100 percent increase in their daily basic wage.

Balasubramaniam, who is also branch leader of the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) at the St. Leys division of the Annfield estate, was suspended from work on December 13, pending an inquiry.

On February 27, Balasubramaniam was given a termination letter by the Annfield estate group manager A.M.C.B. Attanayake. It claimed that Balasubramaniam was sacked after being found guilty of various frame-up charges following a so-called "domestic inquiry" by management. The letter declared that the termination was "immediate" and that he could collect his "gratuity," a meagre fund given to workers when they retire.

Balasubramaniam was accused of seven charges, including that he locked the main gate of the Annfield estate tea factory and, accompanied a group of men, prevented vehicles leaving and entering the factory premises on December 5.

Management's biased and undemocratic "domestic inquiry" was a sham. Balasubramaniam was not given any chance to get legal support or provide evidence for his defence. Three other Annfield estate

workers—Pathmanathan, Subramaniam and Krishnan—have been accused of supporting Balasubramaniam during the alleged incident and three CWC officials—Arulnayahi, Clera and Sivasami—were accused of aiding and abetting the estate workers. Police took statements from the accused after management lodged complaints. Balasubramaniam and the six men reject all the allegations and charges.

The incident claimed by the management occurred on the same day as over 100,000 estate workers began an indefinite national strike to demand the 100 percent increase in their daily basic wage. Annfield management's decision to send vehicles to its tea factory during the national strike was a clear provocation.

The strike continued for nine days until the CWC leadership shut down the stoppage, citing a phony promise by President Maithripala Sirisena that he would "solve" the wage issue. Thousands of workers defied the unions "return to work" directive and remained on strike for another two days.

Balasubramaniam told WSWS reporters that management's actions were totally unjustified. During the "domestic inquiry," management tried to extract from Balasubramaniam the names of other workers who were with him when the incident occurred.

Another worker told the WSWS that Balasubramaniam had been targeted because he spoke about workers' rights and had opposed the closing down of the child care centre in the estate last year. He also criticised the imposition of the "revenue share model" at the estate, which is aimed at driving up productivity.

The CWC has refused to organise any fight to overturn the suspension of Balasubramaniam, or defend the other Annfield estate workers and the CWC officials. This act of betrayal encouraged estate management to terminate Balasubramaniam.

Following their axing of the national wage strike, the CWC and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union signed a sell-out collective agreement with the plantation companies.

Ignoring workers' demands for a 100 percent increase, the union agreed to a 40 percent rise and the scrapping of previous hard-won allowances. In reality, plantation workers' daily wage was increased by 20 rupees or just 11 US cents.

Plantation workers walked out on strike and held demonstrations protesting this betrayal. In an attempt to divert their anger, other plantation unions made bogus claims they would hold further discussions with the government and the companies.

A major clause in the new collective agreement commits the unions to imposing the "out-grower model." This is a contract system which allocates a plot of tea estate land to workers, who are then responsible for maintaining and harvesting the tea bushes. The highly exploitative scheme transforms plantation workers into little more than modern day, bonded sharecroppers, totally dependent for their income on supplying the tea leaves to the estate company after deductions for company's expenses and profit.

The plantation companies are insisting that the unions implement this system as soon as possible in order to end the "daily wage model"—i.e., to drastically lower wage costs and eliminate limited but hard-won working conditions and benefits.

The witch-hunt and termination of Balasubramaniam is a clear sign that the plantation companies, in alliance with the unions, are determined to crush all working-class resistance to the ruthless drive for profit. The unions' betrayal of the plantation workers' wage struggle has strengthened the hands of companies and the government.

Balasubramaniam's sacking and the victimisation of other plantation workers is not an isolated event.

On January 11, six ATG Ceylon workers in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ) were terminated following frame-up allegations. ATG workers have taken indefinite strike action and ongoing protests to

demand the reinstatement of their sacked colleagues.

We urge plantation workers and youth and workers everywhere to issue statements and hold meetings and demonstrations opposing Annfield estate management's sacking of Balasubramaniam.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened in the plantation workers' wage struggle, calling on workers to organise independently of the unions and fight on the basis of a socialist program. The SEP explained that the only way plantation workers could take forward this fight was through the building of workers' action committees in every estate, independent of trade unions, and to mobilise their industrial and political strength. Abbotsleigh Estate workers heeded that call and formed their own action committee.

The Abbotsleigh Workers Action Committee, with the support of the SEP, is holding a plantation workers' conference to discuss the political lessons of their struggle and the way forward. The conference, which will also discuss Balasubramaniam's termination and how to fight it, will be held on March 17 at Hatton Town Hall. We invite workers and youth to participate in this vital conference.



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