

SEP in Sri Lanka wins strong support for plantation workers' conference

Our reporters
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) campaigners have won significant backing from estate workers in the central hills district for the forthcoming plantation workers' conference on 17 March.

Entitled "The lessons of the plantation workers' struggle and way forward to win higher wages and democratic rights," the conference was called by the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee with the support of the SEP. The Action Committee was formed in December, during the nine-day national strike of plantation workers.

Over 100,000 plantation workers were involved in the December walkout, which was called to demand a 1,000-rupee (\$US5.50) basic daily wage. The strike was shut down and betrayed by the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) with the backing of the National Union of Workers (NUW), Upcountry Peoples' Front (UPF), Democratic Peoples' Front (DPF) and Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union (LJEWU).

A few weeks later, on January 28, the CWC and LJEWU signed a sellout collective agreement with the plantation companies, accepting a nominal pay increase and pledging to impose new productivity demands.

Last week SEP and IYSSE campaigners spoke with workers from Theresia Estate, one of several estates owned by Madulsima Plantations. The Theresia Estate employs almost 900 workers and is located near Bogavanthalawa town, about 17 kilometres from Hatton.

Workers from all divisions of the Theresia Estate struck for four days on February 20, in protest against management slashing their work-week from six to four days. The walkout was organised independently of the plantation unions.

"The unions are working in collaboration with

management," one worker told SEP campaigners. "The plantation companies refused to increase our wage, in line with our demands, and instead only gave us a 20-rupee increase. We struck for nine days but the union betrayed us, and now management has reduced our working days. We can't go forward without organising independently of the union. We'll participate in the workers conference and I intend to speak."

V. Annamalai previously worked as a driver at the estate's factory but quit the job because he was unable to support his family on his low wage. He said housing was a burning issue among plantation workers.

"It is common for more than two families to be in one small line room, divided by a partition. How can we afford a decent home on the meagre pay we receive?" he asked. "Most workers have to wait a long time to repair the homes or until they get the EPF [pension fund] or someone in the family goes to work abroad."

A female worker explained how plantation workers were being deprived of the most basic facilities. "We have a dispensary, but there is no doctor and we have to go to the Bogavanthalawa hospital, carrying our children," she said. "The estate school only has classes up to grade eight and so, after that, our children have to go to another school in Bogavanthalawa for further studies."

The Ottery Estate is seven kilometres from Hatton. One section is merged with the Invery Estate, which is owned by Kelani Valley plantations. The other section is in the process of being shut down by its owner. Fifty acres of the estate have been sold to a business developer, who is pulling out the tea bushes to build houses.

In 1983, the Ottery Estate employed 150 workers and was managed by the state-owned People's Estate

Development Board, or Janawasama. In 1989, some parts were sold to private owners. Following a seven-month strike at the estate over living conditions, management slashed its workforce to about 80 people. Workers said that the company had not sent four years of their EPF [pension fund] to the Central Bank, even though it had been deducted from their wages.

Near the main entrance to the Ottery Estate there is an abandoned building at the top of a hill. Workers told SEP campaigners that the building had been a hospital and was constructed in 1938. Its closure, they said, was the result of privatisation.

One worker from the Dickoya Estate explained the onerous productivity targets being demanded by management. “We now have to pluck 20 kilograms daily to receive our basic wage, and if we pluck 15 kilograms we are only paid half that amount,” she said.

“Management claims it has increased the payment to 40 rupees for every extra kilogram we harvest, but we are barely able to pluck two or three extra kilograms. And when it rains, the supervisor cuts three kilograms from our plucked tea leaves to offset the wetness. Leeches and leopards are another threat,” she added.

Her daughter, studies in an A/L class in the commerce stream. The bus fare to her school in Norwood costs 70 rupees and the monthly tuition classes cost 2,000 rupees.

Both the mother and daughter raised concerns about the recent and ongoing military tensions between India and Pakistan. They bought a copy of the International Committee of the Fourth International’s statement “Socialism and the fight against imperialist war” after SEP campaigners explained the party’s socialist, anti-war program.

K. Latchumanan, a former local NUW leader, welcomed the forthcoming conference. He had carefully kept a copy of the SEP’s 2015 election manifesto and proudly showed it to the SEP campaigners.

“You’ve been continuously fighting for a socialist solution for the working class,” he said. “The title of your manifesto was ‘Fight for a socialist program against war and social counterrevolution’ and its analysis has been proven correct.

“[CWC leader] Arumugam Thondaman boasted that he would bring a piped-water system to the estate. We laid the pipes and erected taps outside our homes, but

we’re still waiting for the water. Workers have to carry water long distances and there are queues of people waiting to collect water at these sources,” he said.

The estate workers lack the most basic facilities, including toilets near their homes. Latchumanan’s father and grandfather were plantation workers and there were five families living in one line-room. “Our accommodation was very old,” he said, “and we slept fearfully at night, worried that the dilapidated room would fall down on us.

“Governments change, but our problems remain. I’d like to organise some discussions about your perspective among the workers and to help build the conference.”

Thissakumar, a 34-year-old estate worker, spoke angrily about the union betrayal of the workers’ wage strike and also their inadequate and unsafe living conditions. He pointed to fractures in every wall of his home. Although toilet facilities were virtually non-existent, he was previously fined 5,000 rupees for building a toilet pit in violation of local regulations.

Thissakumar showed campaigners his older sister’s home, where she lives with three children. The building, which is next to a steep incline did not have brick or wooden walls, but was covered with sacks and, like other line buildings in the area, its roof was falling apart.

“All the capitalist union leaders must be rejected. We need a new leadership and we need to gather the support of the youth,” Thissakumar said. He added that he would back the formation of an action committee and organise a discussion before the forthcoming plantation workers’ conference, which will be held at 10 am, Sunday March 17 at the Hatton Town Hall.



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