

Support grows for Sri Lankan plantation workers' conference

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) campaign teams visited several more estates in the central hill district last week, building support for the plantation workers' conference to be held tomorrow, Sunday March 17, at Hatton Town Hall.

The Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee, with the SEP's support, has called the conference to discuss "The lessons of the plantation workers' struggle and the way forward to win higher wages and democratic rights."

After continuous protests, more than 100,000 plantation workers launched an indefinite strike last December for their demand for a 1,000-rupee (\$US5.50) basic daily wage, an increase of 100 percent. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), backed by the other trade unions, shut down the industrial action, citing bogus promises by President Maithripala Sirisena to resolve the wage issue.

After scuttling the workers' courageous struggle, the CWC and Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) signed a collective agreement with the companies. The unions betrayed workers by agreeing to a nominal 40 percent increase, which was, in reality, a mere 20-rupee rise, because the companies slashed allowances.

Last Tuesday, the government announced a meagre 50-rupee daily allowance, limited to one year, in a desperate bid to deflect simmering anger among workers. This allowance will be paid by the state-owned Tea Board, as the companies adamantly oppose any further wage increase.

In fact, the plantation companies are pushing for the "wage model" to be replaced by an "out-grower scheme" designed to increase workloads. This system would reduce workers to share croppers or modern-day

bonded labourers. Each worker would be allocated a plot of tea bushes. After sending the harvest of tea leaves to a company, he would be given a supposed share of the income after the company deducted its input costs and profits.

Workers have resisted this system where it has been implemented already. However, in the collective agreement, the unions agreed to help companies impose it. This will deepen the opposition of workers to the unions.

Last week, SEP and IYSSE campaigners visited Hatton, Watawala, Maskeliya and the Hanthana Estate in the Nuwara-Eliya and Kandy districts. They also spoke to workers at the Aislaby Estate at Bandarawela in the remote Badulla district. Campaigns took place among railway, port and university workers in Colombo and its suburbs, and among university students.

The Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee was formed after the betrayal of the December strike, with the political guidance of the SEP. During the campaign for the March 17 conference, workers have shown interest in forming such committees in their work places in order to break the straitjacket of the unions.

The campaign has centred also on the need to fight for socialist policies and a workers' and peasants' government to implement such policies as part of the struggle for international socialism.

P. Rajah, a National Union of Workers (NUW) committee member in the Dickoya estate near Hatton, commented: "Every worker is now clear about what was done by the companies, the government and the unions all together. Why should the workers listen to such unions again and again?"

Rajah added: "Workers should believe in their own

strength. The unions didn't call for the support of other workers for our struggle. They don't let the workers unite, but always try to divide them."

In the Glenugie Estate at Maskeliya, SEP campaigners held a meeting with a group of workers and youth. S. Naguleshwaran migrated to Colombo looking for a better job, but ended up working at a fuel-filling station. He described the similarities of the working conditions he faced with those of the plantation workers.

"I start work at 5.30 in the morning and finish at 10 at night. Half an hour is allowed for breakfast, and the lunch break is one hour. I work nearly 17 hours a day. It's almost midnight when I go to bed. I usually have two to three hours' sleep. My daily wage is 1,400 rupees. Workers cannot continue like this. We need a new social system."

Other workers actively participated in the discussion and strongly denounced the unions.

K. Sellaiah, a retired watcher from Stamford Hill Estate, said he began working in 1961 at the age of 17. In 2001, he resigned after a manager scolded him. Without any alternative, he rejoined as a casual worker, earning only 8,000 rupees a month, before retiring. He said the NUW used to bargain for workers' demands, "but now they have abandoned this."

Explaining the living conditions in the estate, Sellaiah said: "I was born and grew up in this home. We still live in this line house, which has two 10 by 10-foot rooms. After the estates were taken over by the government, the JEDB [Janatha Estates Development Board] extended a room on the front side. We are four people. This house is not enough. All the families are living like this. Recently we received a water supply from the nearby Ottery estate. Before that, we suffered difficulties getting water.

Sellaiah commented: "We need a society where all can live equally. I'll join other workers to participate in the workers' conference."

T. Tamilvanan, from the Panmure Estate near Hatton, said: "All politicians are responsible for the poor living conditions of workers. The houses of managers and trade union leaders are luxury bungalows, but workers who have worked for a long time live in very bad conditions."

Tamilvanan said many young people had been forced to work in places like Colombo, due to the

oppressive conditions in the estates. Despite moving, he was working for a private company in Colombo for 12 hours a day for just 35,000 rupees a month.

A young mother working at the Abbotsleigh Estate described the conditions on the plantations: "We work overtime on Sundays if we need extra money. For overtime, we have to complete a target of 40 kilograms. It's not an easy task to pluck such an amount of buds, especially in the dry season. Today I went to work at 5:30 in the morning. I had to work continuously up to noon to complete even the usual daily target."

The young mother has two-year-old daughter but cannot stay at home, even on the weekends, to be with her. Her husband works in Colombo as a helper on a construction site and he too cannot afford to come home every weekend.

A young worker from the same estate explained: "I have no faith in trade unions any more." He understood from the recent struggles that the trade unions were not on the workers' side. He added: "The companies and unions don't have any right to decide our wages. The salaries should be decided according to our needs."

Mentioning that he had participated in earlier events organised by the Abbotsleigh Action Committee, the young worker was positive about the upcoming conference. "I hope workers from other sections will join with us at the conference," he said.

We urge workers, youth and progressive-minded intellectuals to attend this important conference, to be held at Hatton Town Hall, starting at 10 tomorrow morning.



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