

Sri Lanka's National Security Council to discuss "violence" in estates

W. A. Sunil, K. Ratnayake
9 March 2021

Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekera, an ex-rear admiral, told the *Sunday Times* last weekend that Sri Lanka's National Security Council (NSC) will today discuss "security issues" in the plantations. His statement was in response to claims by planters and the police that workers are unleashing "violence" in the estates.

The NSC is headed by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and includes Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, key ministers, senior officials from the armed forces, police and intelligence, and other leading state bureaucrats. That the NSC is discussing so-called estate violence as a top priority is a serious threat against plantation workers, who are involved in a long and bitter struggle for higher wages, improved social conditions and democratic rights.

On March 3, hundreds of estate superintendents staged a provocative demonstration in Hatton demanding weapons and weapons training to defend themselves from physical threats by plantation workers.

Ceylon Planters' Society (CPS) President Dayal Kumarage told the media that his organisation wanted a meeting with the president, prime minister and defense secretary to discuss "security matters." He called for authorities to "provide adequate security and, if possible, to patrol the estates as well."

Weerasekera told the *Sunday Times* that the government would not provide managers with weapons because that would produce more unrest among workers. He made it clear however, that the NSC meeting would "take up" the concerns of regional plantation companies [RPCs] and "ensure security was provided to estate management."

The March 3 protest by planters was initiated in response to so-called violence against Alton tea estate superintendent Subash Narayanan in Maskeliya. The

planters claimed that a group of workers physically attacked Narayanan, who had to be hospitalised for several days. The CPS also alleged that attacks have occurred in two other estates.

Police, with the active assistance of Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) officials, have arrested 10 Alton workers—eight on February 18 and two more on March 1—claiming they were involved in the alleged assault.

The CWC, the main plantation trade union, is part of the Rajapakse government. CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman is minister of estate infrastructure. The CWC and all the other estate unions have a long and sordid history of collaborating with the government, the plantation companies and the police against plantation workers.

On March 3, when the 10 arrested Alton workers appeared at the Hatton magistrate court, the planters' lawyer accused them of violence and declared: "This is how terrorism emerges." Defence lawyers rejected the outrageous claim, describing it as an insult against the hard-working plantation workforce.

The magistrate refused bail and remanded the arrested to Kandy prison until March 10. All the arrested workers have rejected the company-police allegations.

Deepening its treachery against the estate workers, the CWC has said it will bring 16 additional workers before the Hatton magistrates. A spokesman for the UpCountry Federation of Civil Organisation (UFCO) revealed yesterday that CWC lawyer Perumal Rajadurai, on the instructions of Thondaman, would present these workers to the courts on March 10. The UFCO is an NGO that works closely with the unions.

These latest 16 "suspects" and the 10 jailed Alton workers are the victims of a company-police conspiracy to break indefinite strike action at the estate that began on February 2, fighting for higher wages and against

management threats.

A manager physically assaulted Alton workers, injuring one female employee, after the strikers blocked the transport of processed tea from the estate on the first day of their walkout. The Alton strike began three days before a February 5 national estate strike called by the CWC for a long-demanded 1,000-rupee (\$US5.12) daily basic wage.

The union's national strike was an attempt to dissipate plantation workers' anger over their declining living conditions. The 1,000-rupee daily wage claim was originally raised six years ago, in 2015, but the CWC and the other plantation unions have consistently betrayed workers' strikes and protests over this issue.

On February 17, Alton workers demonstrated outside the manager's bungalow in protest against his strike-breaking activities. This is the incident that the company alleges was estate workers' "violence."

On March 1, the Rajapakse government, nervous about the eruption of mass action by estate workers—and walkouts by other sections of the working class—gazetted a 1,000-rupee daily wage for plantation workers. This consists of 900-rupee basic wage and a 100-rupee cost of living allowance payment.

The RPCs, however, have not agreed to this grossly inadequate increase. Instead, they have threatened to abrogate previous collective agreements, including clauses providing employees with 300 working days per year for a guaranteed minimum income.

The RPCs claim they cannot increase wages because maintenance costs are higher. They insist productivity must be driven up and other cost-cutting measures imposed in order to be internationally competitive.

This is the background to the allegations of "estate violence" and the government's decision to treat this as a national security issue. More repressive measures will be unleashed to crush estate workers' unrest and impose plantation owners' demands, including the restructuring and privatisation of "unproductive" estates.

In recent days, a police jeep has been patrolling the Alton estate, with no opposition from the unions, in a foretaste of the sort of violent operations being prepared.

These developments vindicate the warnings made by the Socialist Equality Party in its March 1 statement, "Release jailed Sri Lankan estate workers! Defend all

workers from company-police conspiracies!"

The statement urged plantation workers to form their own action committees, independent of the unions, to demand the release of the Alton estate workers and discuss the class actions and political program required to defend the social and democratic rights of all workers.

The employer-state and trade union conspiracy now being unleashed against the Alton estate workers is an attack on the entire working class. It is yet another indication that the Rajapakse government will attempt to crush all opposition to its austerity attacks on the working class, amid a sharp economic crisis that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified.

The Rajapakse government came to power promising the capitalist class it would boost profits and impose the burden of the rising foreign debt and falling export earnings on the working class. In order to carry out this agenda, it is whipping up racial and religious tensions against Tamils and Muslims to divide and weaken working class and preparing a presidential dictatorship based on the military.

This offensive can be defeated only by fighting for a workers' and peasants' government on the basis of international socialist program. That is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact