

The SEP leads the fight against company, police and union witch-hunt of Sri Lankan plantation workers

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M. Thevarajah is a longstanding member of the National Committee of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka. He has played a key role in the party's struggle among tea plantation workers and the fight to build rank-and-file committees in this key section of the island's working class. He made these remarks at the 2021 International May Day Online Rally held by the World Socialist Web Site and the ICFI on May 1.

Comrades,

As part of the developing class struggle globally, working class struggles are emerging in Sri Lanka, India and the rest of South Asia.

Hundreds of thousands of plantation workers in Sri Lanka took strike action on February 5 demanding a daily wage increase to 1,000 rupees [about \$US5]. The Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), the main plantation union, a partner of the government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse, did not call this action to mobilise workers against the government and plantation companies, but to let off steam under conditions of mounting anger among the workers over the companies' refusal to accept even a meagre rise in daily wages.

About 500 workers at the Alton Estate in the Maskeliya area in Sri Lanka's central plantation district were on strike from February 2 until March 26. In addition to demanding a 1,000-rupee daily wage, they opposed management repression and defied the CWC's refusal to support their action. Seizing on an angry protest held by striking workers in front of the estate manager's bungalow, Alton management and the police launched a massive witch-hunt against the Alton workers in an attempt to break their strike.

As a part of this witch-hunt, 20 workers and two

youth were arrested by the police and put in remand prison by a local magistrate. They were only released on harsh bail conditions. Alton management has terminated the service of 38 workers, including 20 who were arrested. All 38 workers and two youths face frame-up charges.

The CWC is actively collaborating with management and the police in this witch-hunt, even providing a list of workers to be arrested. All other unions active in the estate, including the National Union of Workers, Democratic Workers' Congress, Up Country People's Front, and Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, are abetting this witch-hunt by not doing anything to defend the workers.

This repression not only failed to discourage the plantation workers from conducting a struggle for a wage increase and a reduction of work targets set by the management, it also prompted workers at one estate after another to join the struggle. Under these conditions, the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka has energetically intervened at Alton Estate, as well as at other workplaces, for the building of Action Committees to unify these struggles and provide them with a socialist perspective.

The SEP has launched a campaign to defend the Alton workers against the management-company witch-hunt, explaining that it is a part of the assault of the Rajapakse government, ruling elite and big business against the working class as a whole. We have demanded the withdrawal of all bogus charges against the Alton workers and the reinstatement of all sacked workers immediately. The campaign has won widespread support from plantation workers and other sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

The call made by the ICFI for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to begin and develop a global counter-offensive of the working class against assaults by the ruling class on their social and democratic rights is an important step forward. The SEP is fighting to rally the working class in South Asia, including plantation workers in Sri Lanka, in support of the ICFI's call.

In response to the growth of opposition in the working class and oppressed masses, the ruling classes in South Asia, like their counterparts worldwide, have resorted to whipping up communalism to divide and weaken the working class. They have also intensified their plans for dictatorial forms of rule. In Sri Lanka, the Rajapakse government is whipping up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism, claiming the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) is attempting to raise its head again and seizing on the 2019 Easter Sunday bombing.

The Tamil and Muslim bourgeois parties in Sri Lanka have responded in kind by promoting their own reactionary forms of nationalism, thus assisting to divide the working class along racial lines.

The nearly three decades of anti-Tamil racialist war waged by successive governments in Colombo against the LTTE was ended in May 2009. This defeat of the LTTE was not merely a military defeat, but the outcome of the bankruptcy of its reactionary bourgeois separatist program. In line with that policy, the LTTE was utterly hostile to the working class in Sri Lanka, India and internationally. They focused on appeals to the imperialist powers, above all the US and European ruling class, and their regional allies, such as India, claiming that they would support the oppressed Tamil masses against successive Colombo governments.

Even after the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009, the north and east of Sri Lanka has remained under military occupation. Underscoring the real class character of the racialist war conducted for 30 years under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the racial oppression of the Tamil people continues.

The Tamil bourgeois nationalist parties, including the TNA (Tamil National Alliance), are continuing their reactionary pro-imperialist policies. They support the military-strategic offensive of US imperialism and its ally India against China in the hope of getting their assistance to pressure Colombo into accepting a power-

sharing arrangement between the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim elites to secure the privileges of the Tamil elite.

Along these lines, the TNA actively supported the regime-change operation sponsored by the US with the assistance of India after Sri Lanka's presidential election in January 2015, which replaced the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse with the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government.

The TNA went on to closely collaborate with the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, even under conditions of the continuation of the military occupation in the northern Jaffna peninsula, and intensified attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class and oppressed masses, including the imposition of IMF-dictated austerity measures.

The SEP vehemently rejects national separatism and insists that democratic rights can be secured only as part of the struggle to overthrow capitalist rule through a unified struggle of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers based on a socialist program. For this the leading social force for the political transformation, the working class, must be organised and mobilised independent of the bourgeois parties and their "left" hangers on across all communities. The aim of this united movement of the working class is to overthrow bourgeois rule and establish a Sri Lanka-Eelam Socialist Republic, as a part of a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia and internationally.



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