

SEP and IYSSE holds plantation workers' demonstration to fight for socialist policies

Our correspondents
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On April 12, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a demonstration in Hatton, a major town in Sri Lanka's central plantation district. It was part of the SEP's intervention in the ongoing mass movement against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. Central to the party's campaign is the building of workers' action committees to independently mobilise the working class on a socialist perspective.

Demonstrators held placards calling for removal of the Rajapakse regime, rejection of any future capitalist interim government, repudiation of Sri Lanka's foreign debt and the building of action committees. Other placards called for mobilisation of the international working class to end the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

The protest attracted widespread public interest with some young people deciding to join in and many bystanders offering encouragement. Passing vehicles honked their horns in support.

SEP and IYSSE members and supporters campaigned in the Hatton and Maskeliya area in the lead up to the event. They won strong backing from workers and youth in the tea estates who are bitterly angry over the intensification of social attacks by the Rajapakse government.

In spite of ongoing paper shortages in Sri Lanka, over 1,000 copies of the SEP's April 7 statement in Sinhala and Tamil entitled "Bring down Sri Lanka's Rajapakse government! Abolish the executive presidency! Form action committees to fight for a socialist program of action!" were printed.

Several other demonstrations have been held in recent days in the central tea plantation districts where most Tamil-speaking workers live, including in

Bogawantalawa and Ragala, as well as Hatton. These events were held in support of the ongoing protests in Colombo's Galle Face Green where tens of thousands are gathered. Many Tamil youth, originally from the plantations but now working in Colombo, have joined the Galle Face Green protests. Tea plantation workers have been heavily impacted by the rapid increases in the cost of food, fuel and other basic necessities.

The plantation unions, which are notorious for their collaboration with the companies and the government, were at first silent about the growing anti-government protests. But as political unrest grew among estate workers, the National Union of Workers, Democratic People's Front and the Up-country People's Front, decided to hold a joint demonstration and a rally at Talawakelle on April 7 to dissipate and contain workers' anger.

Two days earlier, on April 5, Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader Jeevan Thondaman resigned as Rajapakse's state minister for estate infrastructure affairs.

In contrast to the treacherous policies of these unions, plantation workers from Glenugie and Deeside estate went on strike in response to a decision by the estate's action committee. About 200 workers walked out and demonstrated to demand the ouster of the Rajapakse regime. The Glenugie and Deeside Estates Action Committee (GEWAC) was previously initiated by the SEP.

One plantation worker, Nalluthamphy from the Lindula Estate, spoke with WSWs reporters in the leadup to the April 12 demonstration. He explained the impact of the rising cost of food and other essentials.

"The cost of living at present is unbearable," he said. "We have to pay 200 rupees (\$US75 cents) for one kilogram of rice or wheat. Dhal per kilogram and one

litre of coconut oil are 450 and 1,200 rupees respectively. How can we live under these conditions?”

He pointed out that plantation workers' wages are not fixed. “We have to pluck 20 kilos per day to get 1,000 rupees. If we can't, then we get less, about 50 rupees per kilo,” he said.

“Farmers are also facing severe problems. Buying fertilizer is difficult because one packet [50kg] of fertilizer is Rs 18,000. How are farmers supposed to cultivate?”

He denounced all the capitalist political parties and said workers were discussing banning politicians from coming to their homes and begging for votes in future elections.

N. Devapiriya, a social worker, said: “I've been a social worker for nearly 20 years and am very happy to participate in this struggle. If I'd known about this protest earlier, I would have come with some other people and joined the protest. We should continue the fight until we defeat the dictatorship [of Rajapakse] and continue to raise our voice for our rights.”

Commenting after the April 12 protest, SEP political committee member M. Thevarajah said, “A massive opposition of workers, farmers and youths has emerged demanding resignation of the President and his government. The SEP supports this campaign but even if Rajapakse's government is brought down, other capitalist parties will form a government with no solution for workers, farmers, and oppressed Tamil people of North and East.

“It is the capitalist system we have to overthrow, which is the source of attacks against the social conditions of workers and the poor. We have to build an independent movement of the working class to overthrow the Rajapakse government, abolish the executive presidency and establish a workers' and farmers' government.

“There are pressing questions for the working class amid this social calamity. The US-NATO proxy war against Russia is very dangerous for the world's masses. It can easily descend to a devastating third world war. The ICFI and SEP are fighting to build an international anti-war movement. We are fighting to overthrow the capitalist system, the root cause of the war. Only by fighting for the world socialist revolution, can we stop the war.” he said.

K Kandipan, the GEWAC secretary and a leading

SEP member in the area, said, “We are fighting to unite Sinhala Tamil workers and Muslim workers, and for a workers' and farmers' government. In every estate, the management attacks workers who are at the forefront of fighting for their rights. Thirty-eight workers from Alton estate at Upcot, 11 workers from Katukelle estate division and five workers from Welioya estate, Hatton were sacked by the management. Workers need action committees here and every workplace to unite workers and fight for their rights.”



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