

Sri Lankan workers join SEP and plantation action protests

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and plantation workers action committees at the Alton and Glenugie estates in Up-cot and Maskeliya respectively organised demonstrations and protests on Thursday. The protests were part of the general strike across the island of millions of workers that day demanding the resignation of the President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government.

The central plantation districts were totally shut down, with workers across the area walking out and holding demonstrations in all the main townships, including Nuwara Eliya, Hatton, Maskeliya, Up-cot, Bogwanthalawa and Haputale. Shops were closed in support and all transport shut down by noon.

Estate workers have been hard hit by the Rajapakse regime which has imposed the unprecedented economic crisis triggered by COVID-19 and the Ukraine war onto the working masses. Protests and strikes involving hundreds of thousands have been ongoing across the country since early April in response to shortages of essentials, escalating price increases and power cuts. The rising cost of wheat flour, rice, bread and kerosene oil has drastically impacted estate workers.

The plantation unions, including the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), National Union of Workers (NUW), Up-country People's Front (UPF) and Democratic People's Front (DPF), like other Sri Lankan unions, maintained a stony silence about the brutal social attacks. Confronted with the rising anger of plantation workers, the estate unions were compelled to call on their members to join Thursday's national strike.

The political response of the SEP and the estate action committees on Thursday was completely different to the unions which back the Colombo political establishment and are desperately working to tie workers to the main capitalist parties. CWC leader

Jeevan Thondaman was until April a cabinet minister in the Rajapakse government while the NUW, UPF and DPF are partners of the parliamentary opposition party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB).

The Alton Estate Action Committee and the SEP demonstration and march, which attracted around 200 workers and youths, began at the Alton estate. Most of those participating were tea-plucking women and young girls. Several young mothers carried their babies to indicate their anger over the appalling social conditions they now face.

Protesters walked from the upper to the lower division of the estate to Up-cot town where they were joined by other workers. They then marched to the nearby Gouraville estate where they held a public rally.

Banners carried on the march included, "Abolish executive presidency, bring down the Rajapakse government," "Reject interim regimes, fight for a workers' and peasants' government," "For a socialist program, repudiate foreign loans," "Build the international unity of the working class, build Action committees," "Stop US-NATO proxy war against Russia," "Mobilise the international working class against capitalism."

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah addressed the gathering, telling protesters that the general strike was a high point in the mass struggle against the Rajapakse government. The plantation unions, he said, had tried to ignore the mass opposition but were forced to call the strike.

"The NUW, DPF and UPF are aligned with the bourgeois opposition SJB and are campaigning for an interim administration. Like the Rajapakse government, any future 'interim regime' will implement the IMF's restructuring program. This will be devastating for the masses.

“The only way out is to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on an international socialist program. The plantations should be nationalised under workers’ control, as the workers’ government did when it nationalised big companies after 1917 Russian Revolution. Workers’ rights will be defended only in that way.”

“Alton estate is one place where the treacherous role of the trade unions has been clearly revealed. The Horana Plantation Company, which runs Alton estate, has sacked 38 workers under bogus charges. Management was only able to carry out this attack because of the support of the unions, especially the Ceylon Workers Congress,” Thevarajah explained.

Another demonstration involving over 750 workers was organised by the Glenugie Workers Action Committee (GWAC) and the SEP. Protesters marched to Maskeliya, a main town in the area. Glenugie workers were joined by others from the Mocha, Deeside, Adams Peak and Brunswick estates. Workers from the Mocha Estate walked about 5km to Mallihaipoo Junction where the protest began, linking up with the others and then marching through the Brunswick estate.

K. Kandipan, the GWAC secretary and a prominent SEP member in the area, addressed workers at Mallihaipoo Junction. He called for the ousting the Rajapakse administration but insisted that the struggle had to be based on the fight for socialist policies and for a workers’ and peasants’ government.

The official political establishment and its parliamentary parties were rotten to the core, he said, pointing out that the trade unions defended the capitalist state and big companies. Kandipan explained that workers needed to establish independent action committees to fight for their rights.



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