

# Sri Lankan plantation union leaders call on European powers to support democratic rights

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A group of Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) leaders, including MP Mano Ganesan, met with the European Union's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) Monitoring Delegation in Colombo last week. The alliance wants the delegation to pressure the Sri Lankan government to grant limited democratic and human rights measures, as part of the continuation of the GSP+, which expires next year.

GSP+ is preferential trade access offered by the European Union (EU) to various countries in which tariffs for eligible exports are zeroed. The GSP+ concession was awarded to Sri Lanka after the 2004 Asian tsunami. Last week's visit to Colombo by the EU delegation was to assess whether this concession would be continued.

Sri Lanka exports a range of finished products—garments, tea and rubber—to the EU, earning \$2.9 billion in exports in 2024. Any future loss of GSP+ tariff concessions, combined with new tariff increases by the US, would be a huge blow to Sri Lanka's export earnings. It would not only worsen the country's existing economic plight, but see the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People Power (JVP/NPP) government intensify its attacks on the entire working class.

The TPA is a Tamil bourgeois political formation made up of three Tamil-speaking plantation worker unions—the Democratic Workers Congress, the National Workers Union, and the Up-country People Front. It was formed in 2015 to divide plantation workers from other sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

The TPA describes hill-country plantation workers as Malaiyaha Tamil and demands that they be considered a separate ethnic community with a separate administrative region.

These divisive demands have nothing to do with defending the jobs, wages and working conditions of estate workers but are to bolster the political positions and privileges of the Tamil elite in the plantation areas. Other Sri Lankan plantation unions are also promoting this reactionary and

divisive policy.

The TPA and all the other plantation trade unions are pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist organisations. They do not stand for the interests of the estate workers but defend the capitalist state and the plantation companies.

The TPA wants the EU delegation to demand that the JVP/NPP government of President Anura Dissanayake immediately suspend the Prevention of Terrorism Act and revive constitutional reform measures for a power-sharing deal to the Tamil elites. It also wants the establishment of a Truth Commission and Accountability Mechanism, the release of all long-term Tamil political prisoners, and the inclusion of the Hill Country Tamil Plantation Community in GSP+ arrangements.

In submitting these proposals, the TPA is not concerned about the democratic and social rights of estate workers but the financial difficulties facing the plantation companies and the Sri Lankan government if they lose GSP+ tariff concessions.

At the same time, the TPA wants to develop a relationship with the EU, hoping to secure privileges for the Tamil elite in the plantation areas, in return for supporting the geopolitical agenda of the European imperialist powers, and promoting them as crusaders for human rights.

As a statement issued by the TPA declared, "The EU's role is now more vital than ever... and it is the final international partner capable of holding Sri Lanka accountable."

Appeals to EU imperialism are a reactionary deadend. Contrary to the TPA's claims, the EU is notorious for its systematic assaults on the democratic and social rights of its own working class, as well as brutal attacks on migrants and on workers and youth who oppose the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Under its April 2024 "migration pact," EU members are strengthening their anti-refugee and anti-migrant measures, imposing even more repressive measures against workers

while boosting military spending to unprecedented levels. While the EU has previously made limited criticisms of human rights violations in Sri Lanka, it hopes to use GSP+ as a lever to boost its political influence over Colombo.

For its part, the TPA bureaucracy and every other plantation union, including the Ceylon Workers Congress, National Estate Workers Union and the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union, are completely silent over the attacks by plantation companies on estate workers' social conditions and democratic rights.

Estate workers, who are paid a meagre daily wage of just 1,350 rupees (\$US4.51), are among the poorest and most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class. They face backbreaking working conditions, overcrowded accommodation in more than 100-year-old line rooms, and substandard health and education facilities.

The terrible plight of estate workers and the worsening conditions facing all other workers is the direct responsibility of the TPA and the rest of the trade union bureaucracies. Working hand-in-glove with the plantation companies and successive Sri Lankan governments, the unions are intensifying the exploitation of plantation workers and actively suppressing their struggles.

In March 2021, 38 workers from Alton Estate in Maskeliya who went on strike for a wage increase and against management harassment were sacked and arrested on trumped-up allegations of physically attacking an estate manager and an assistant manager. The witch hunt, which was carried out by management and the police with the support of plantation unions, has dragged on for more than four years.

The Horana plantation company, which owns Alton Estate, rejects any reinstatement of these workers, and the trade unions refuse to organise any struggle to win back their jobs and end the witch hunt.

Since the end of the 26-year brutal racist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, successive Colombo governments have falsely promised to abolish the Prevention of Terrorism Act, release Tamil political prisoners, and establish a truth commission in response to criticisms from human rights organisations and the UN.

During last week's visit, the EU delegation praised the Dissanayake government for its "renewed commitment to international conventions." GSP+ Monitoring Mission chief Charles Whiteley declared it was "positively considering the GSP+ review in light of recent progress," claiming that "Sri Lanka's renewed commitment to international conventions, transparency, and rule of law is encouraging. The European

Union remains a partner in this path to responsible growth."

Contrary to these false claims, the JVP/NPP government has abandoned its election promises, including the "abolition" of the Prevention of Terrorism Act and other repressive laws, the release of "political prisoners" and other pledges.

Dissanayake is pushing ahead with the implementation of the entire austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), promising to impose "law and order and the national security."

Translated into plain language, establishing "law and order and the national security" means the unrestrained use of existing repressive laws and executive presidential powers to suppress all working-class opposition to the IMF program.

Sri Lankan workers cannot wait in the hope that the trade union bureaucracy will do something to defend their jobs and social rights. This is an illusion. The working class must break from the trade unions and all capitalist parties and take the struggle to defend their jobs, wages and basic democratic rights into its own hands.

Union bureaucrats are responsible for the present situation confronting plantation workers. This is demonstrated by the active participation of the trade unions in the management and police witch hunt of the Alton Estate workers.

Recognising that the union bureaucracies are their class enemies, workers must form their own independent action committees in the plantations, factories, workplaces and neighbourhoods to defend their interests.

The struggle against all government and company attacks must be organised through these action committees as an independent political movement of the working class.

In opposition to the divisive politics promoted by TPA leaders, a united movement of workers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—is absolutely necessary.

Such a movement needs to fight for a workers' and peasants' government that puts an end to the capitalist profit system and implements socialist policies, including the nationalisation of major banks, factories, and plantations, placing them under working-class control.



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