

SEP Sri Lanka holds public meeting on death of two plantation workers

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Estate Workers Action Committee (EWAC) held a public meeting on December 21 at the PMD Function Hall in Maskeliya. The event, which was streamed on the party's Facebook page, has been viewed by 3,700 people so far and shared 173 times.

The meeting was originally scheduled for November 30, but had to be postponed due to the disastrous impact of Cyclone Ditwah across the island, with the central plantation districts among the worst-hit areas.

In the first week of November, two plantation workers—Vijayakumar (49) of the Maussakelle Estate, Maskeliya, and Rajinikantha (25) of the Kiriporuwa Estate, Yatiyanthota—died in industrial accidents. These deaths are part of a growing wave of workplace accidents globally.

Vijayakumar was killed after being struck by a tea-leaf grinding machine that lacked safety guards, causing fatal head injuries. Rajinikantha died when a decades-old boiler, which had not been properly maintained, exploded. Two other workers were injured, one seriously.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, these deaths were not simply industrial accidents, but industrial murders caused by companies ignoring workplace safety measures in the drive for profit.

SEP members and EWAC activists campaigned for the meeting, stressing the necessity for a discussion on the growing number of industrial accidents in Sri Lanka and internationally, and how workers can address this situation. Alarmed by the growing influence of the SEP among plantation workers, the trade union bureaucracy sought to undermine the campaign by provoking the family of the deceased worker Vijayakumar against the SEP and EWAC.

Despite bad weather conditions, around 30 people, including many estate workers, attended the event. A number of workers had been badly affected by recent landslides, some coming directly from temporary makeshift camps. They listened attentively to all the speeches, shared their views at the end of the meeting, and expressed support for an SEP/EWAC investigation into the deaths of the two plantation workers.

A resolution supporting the SEP/EWAC investigation was passed unanimously, expressing the workers' determination to expose and resist profit-driven industrial killings.

SEP Political Committee member K. Kandeepan chaired the meeting, explaining how Vijayakumar and Rajinikantha had been killed and stressing that years of neglect of basic safety measures by plantation management—accepted by the trade unions—had paved the way for the deaths of the two men.

Kandeepan pointed out that the harsh, slave-like conditions of plantation workers—worsened by unemployment, the economic crisis and malnutrition—had been further devastated by the recent cyclone.

Citing an incident during the campaign for the public meeting, Kandeepan said a village officer had tried to force landslide-affected families out of the safety centres, even threatening military intervention. Nearly a month later, he continued, hundreds of workers were still displaced, with no guarantee of returning home or accessing safe alternative housing.

Kandeepan also referred to the witch-hunt against workers at several estates, including Alton in Up-Cot, because they had campaigned for a wage hike. Thirty-eight workers were sacked at Alton, and 26 were charged with criminal offences almost five years ago in a frame-up case orchestrated by the company and the police.

Kandeepan urged workers to reject the treachery of the trade union bureaucracies, who were responsible for maintaining the dire social conditions on the plantations, and to form independent action committees to fight for industrial safety and decent wages and working conditions.

The next speaker, SEP Central Committee member M. Thevarajah, explained, “The deaths of Vijayakumar and Rajinikantha express the brutal nature of exploitation by the plantation companies. If proper safety measures had been in place, their lives could have been saved. While companies are always keen to increase their profits, they never consider workers' lives.”

Thevarajah elaborated on the criminal role played by plantation trade unions, which work hand-in-glove with management to boost company profits. He noted that whenever the SEP and EWAC intervened to defend plantation workers' jobs and wage rights, the union leadership lined up with management and the police—a pattern repeatedly seen at the Alton Estate in Up-Cot.

Referring to the SEP/EWAC campaign for this month's public meeting, Thevarajah said the companies and trade union bureaucracies had tried to undermine the event: "A CWC [Ceylon Workers' Congress] local bureaucrat named Jayapalan, trying to halt us, telephoned the estate manager [about the meeting]. He failed because the workers supported us."

Thevarajah pointed out that plantation companies reaped billions and billions in profits while driving workers into deeper misery. He explained that the SEP was fighting to build a new leadership based on the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government and public ownership of the major industries under workers' control.

SEP Assistant Secretary Saman Gunadasa delivered the main report. He indicted the global capitalist system for the rising toll of industrial deaths and the devastation caused by climate change, including Cyclone Ditwah, insisting that these tragedies are not accidental but the product of a social order that subordinates human life to profit.

Gunadasa placed the deaths of the two workers alongside fatal workplace incidents in the United States and Australia, including the killing of auto worker Ronald "Ronnie" Adams in Michigan and multiple deaths at logistics facilities and industrial plants.

Rejecting claims that these tragedies were unfortunate mishaps, Gunadasa said they were the predictable result of production organised to maximise returns for corporate owners. In Sri Lanka, he pointed out, factories and estates are controlled by powerful conglomerates and billionaire interests, which impose speed-ups, cost-cutting and the systematic removal of workplace safety measures.

The intensification of work and the removal of safety precautions "are written into" the deaths of Vijayakumar and Rajinikantha, he said, noting: "Workers are routinely exposed to lethal dangers while employers evade responsibility."

Gunadasa placed these crimes in their historical context, saying Sri Lankan capitalism has preserved colonial-era brutality since independence, with harsh working conditions, low wages and plantation workers still confined to dilapidated line rooms.

The speaker also recalled the death of Premalal Jayakody, a 23-year-old worker crushed by a hydraulic press at the Korea-Lanka Shoe Factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone in 1993.

Management and the media attempted to blame the victim, Gunadasa said, but an investigation by the Revolutionary Communist League—the predecessor of the SEP—exposed that the machine's safety mechanisms had broken and that management had forced Jayakody to operate it regardless. Today's employers and governments still operate in the same way, he said, adding: "No compensation, no punishment—and the same machines continue to be used."

Gunadasa told the meeting that similar patterns follow

industrial fatalities internationally. Managements rush to resume production while trade union officials suppress workers' resistance. State regulatory bodies pretend to inspect workplace issues while delaying or diluting investigations.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is the most devastating example of this logic. Millions of workers and their families were sacrificed worldwide as governments prioritised corporate profits over public health," the speaker said.

Concluding, Gunadasa urged independent working-class mobilisation through action committees, which must demand investigations into all industrial deaths, establish the right to stop all unsafe work, and fight for the expropriation of major banks and corporations under workers' control. He urged workers to transform their grief into organisation and their anger into international solidarity in the struggle for socialism.

Several attendees spoke from the audience following the speeches.

Panchavarnam attended the meeting even though her house had been damaged by Cyclone Ditwah. She praised the SEP/EWAC campaign and its defiance of pressure from plantation bosses and trade unions.

She told the meeting that she had been struck by a tea-leaf transporting lorry ten years ago while working as a tea plucker. "I was not given any compensation by the company. No trade union leader spoke for me. If there had been a fight against injustices then, as you are fighting for justice now, Vijayakumar would not have had to die today," she said.

An unemployed female worker from Gawarawila Estate said the meeting was excellent and that everything the speakers had said was true. "We cannot win our rights by limiting ourselves to isolated protests at individual estates. The CWC leaders don't care about our plight. During the cyclone disaster, not a single CWC leader visited to see our tragic fate," she said.

Ramaiah, a bakery worker from Stockholm Estate, described the ruthless exploitation on the estates—insecurity, unpaid wages, unsafe conditions and housing destruction—amid rising living costs. He urged workers to unite across race and religion and pledged support for the party's struggle.



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