

Sri Lanka: Detention of framed-up plantation workers extended

By Vijitha Silva
8 January 1999

A provincial high court in Sri Lanka has extended the detention of 26 tea plantation workers and a newspaper reporter--the fourth time the courts have extended the detention period. The workers were arrested on the basis of charges concocted by the local police last October 27, while they were on strike. They are being held in a local prison in Badulla, 250 kilometres from Colombo.

The police successfully petitioned the court to extend the detention by making fraudulent claims that they have been unable to complete their criminal investigation.

The workers are from the Galaboda division of an estate owned by the Hapugastenna Plantations Company. They are accused of setting fire to the residence of the estate manager on the evening of October 26. The jailed employees maintain that the fire was a provocation organised by management with the help of the police for the purpose of victimising the workers and breaking their strike.

At the time of the arrests, the workers had been on strike for 60 days to press their demands for the removal of the manager and an end to management harassment in general. Not only has the estate manager routinely robbed workers of their pay, by short-changing them for piecework and falsifying attendance records. He has tried to divide the work force by stoking anti-Tamil racism. (The majority of the workers on Sri Lanka's tea plantations are Tamil-speakers, the descendants of indentured labourers brought to Sri Lanka by the British in the nineteenth century.)

By mid-October support for the strike by the 1,700 Galaboda estate workers was building across Sri Lanka's highland tea region, despite the best efforts of the bureaucrats of the Ceylon Workers Congress and

other unions to put an end to the dispute. 50,000 workers had joined a one-day work stoppage in support of the strike and there were calls for a second walkout.

It was in this context that the fire occurred. Moreover, on the night preceding that of the fire, the workers' living quarters were stoned by unknown assailants.

The day after the blaze the police, with the help of management, prepared a list of names of strikers who were to be arrested. They included a local union leader who had been shot in both his legs by the police on the evening of October 25, when he had approached a police patrol to find out who was stoning the workers' quarters.

A local reporter from a major Tamil-language daily, *Virakesari*, has also been arrested. He is charged with inciting the workers to protest, although he did nothing more than send reports to his paper about the strike. His arrest is a flagrant attack on democratic rights. The police and government are now trying to make it a crime to publicise workers struggles, let alone lend them support.

The frame-up of the Galaboda workers is part of a pattern of management-state victimisation and witch-hunts of the tea plantation workers and politically minded youth in the estate region.

Last September, on another estate belonging to Hapugastenna Plantations, the workers' quarters were burned to the ground by racist thugs. The workers escaped injury only because they had taken refuge inside the plantation factory.

And six youths who were arrested by police last June on false charges of throwing a bomb at a tea factory in the Hatton area--the heartland of the tea estate region--remain in prison. One of these six, Udaya Kumar, is a supporter of the Socialist Equality Party

(SEP). He and two of the other youths now being held under the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) were earlier detained on false charges of being LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) operatives. The SEP was able to secure their release through a powerful island-wide defence campaign.

These attacks are aimed at breaking resistance to Sri Lankan capital's drive to "restructure" the tea industry. In 1996 the People's Alliance Government began privatising the state-owned plantations, a move hailed by the International Monetary Fund in 1996. The previous United National Party (UNP) government had announced plans to privatise the plantations, but in the face of mass opposition had limited its "restructuring" of the tea industry to privatising the management of the estates. The current government of Chandrika Kumaratunga was able to sell off the estates because it secured the collaboration of the unions and of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Stalinist Communist Party (CPSL), both of which are members of the People's Alliance coalition.

The leaders of two major estate unions--the Ceylon Workers Congress and the Up Country Peoples' Front--have respectively become a cabinet minister and a deputy minister in the PA government. The unions allied with the UNP and the Nava Sama Samaja Party also accepted the government's privatisation program.

The newly privatised estates have sought to freeze wages, increase workloads, and to slash jobs by introducing new technology and, where feasible, changing to less labour intensive crops. Already workers' jobs, living standards and working conditions have been adversely affected, while productivity has soared. The tea companies, however, are demanding much more, on the grounds that Sri Lankan tea must compete on world markets with tea from Kenya, where labour costs are much lower.

Tea prices have fallen sharply in recent months in the wake of the East Asian and Russian financial crises. The management harassment and racist provocations and the police frame-up of the plantation workers are all aimed at terrorising them into submission. The state and employers are acutely aware that the unions and the LSSP and CP are increasingly unable to contain and control the anger of the plantation workers. Last February, many estate workers refused to work after their union leadership had dropped their demands for a

significant wage increase and ordered an end to a powerful nation-wide plantation strike.

The unions have abandoned the framed-up Galaboda workers. Although the unions have provided a lawyer to appear for workers, they are waging no campaign to win their release. The victimised workers told a correspondent for the *World Socialist Web Site* that the union leaders are against any industrial or political mobilisation on their behalf.

The Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka is mounting a petition demanding the Galaboda workers' immediate and unconditional release.

See Also:

Protest Australian government exclusion of Tamil socialist

[7 January 1999]

Tea plantation workers face frame up in Sri Lanka

[20 November 1998]

Unions call off strike by plantation workers in Sri Lanka

[17 February 1998]

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