

Sri Lankan SEP campaigns at hard-hit industrial estate

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4 April 2009

The Katuwana industrial estate in Homagama, about 20 km southeast of Colombo, was once regarded as a model "small scale industrial estate". For the past two decades, thousands of rural youth have come seeking jobs because of the problems created by rural agricultural decline and unemployment. Since 2008, however, thousands have been forced to return to their villages, after losing their jobs.

A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team for the April 25 Western Provincial Council elections went to the estate to meet workers and discuss the party's policies. The SEP is fielding a list of 46 candidates in the Colombo district.

The Katuwana estate started in 1990 as a project of the Urban Development Authority (UDA). Under the free market policies introduced by the United National Party (UNP) government of President Jayawardene that came to power in 1977, some large Free Trade Zones were established as cheap labour platforms for foreign and local investors. Jayawardene's successor Premadasa started several small industrial estates, like Katuwana, for smaller local businessmen.

At the beginning of 2008, according to the UDA, there were 61 registered entrepreneurs in the estate, employing about 10,000 workers. Many were garment factories dependent on exporting. Over the past year, however, managements have begun to shut the factories and fire thousands of workers, blaming the lack of export orders and higher production costs compared to China and other competitors.

More than a thousand workers lost their jobs when Time Garments closed several months ago. At least eight factories had already shut down at the cost of over 5,000 jobs. Among them were Avlon Lanka (detergents), Nawjeb and Warna (cardboard cartons), Steinhardt (printing) and Belsey (water containers).

Workers in other factories face the same threat. The axing of overtime, cutting of bonuses and trimming of

workforces are also taking place. Small business people who survived by supplying services in and around the estate, such as boarding-room owners, food suppliers and shop keepers, have also been badly hit.

Once there were bustling roads on Sundays as young workers went to the markets or movie theatres. The roads were empty when the SEP team visited last Sunday. However, workers had stories to tell.

Priyantha, a worker at Norfolk Company, a meat factory, told us: "I was born in Anuradhapura [in the North Central Province] to a peasant who toiled the land and tried to feed me and my sister.

"After my mother found a job in the Middle East, we grew up in the house of my father's relative. When I was just 18, I came to Colombo looking for a job. I worked at several places before joining this company five years ago. My basic monthly salary now is 9,650 rupees (about \$US88). With overtime and other allowances I can earn about 16,000 rupees a month.

"Our daily living expenses are unbearable. We have to spend a large amount on medicine. My wife has to visit a private maternity clinic once a week. Each time, the consultancy fee is 450 rupees."

Asked about the situation in his work place, he added: "Earlier the company successfully sold our products to tourist hotels. Now the demand has fallen. Hotel people say that tourists no longer come here due to the war and because foreigners have been hit by financial crises."

Asked about the war in the north and the political situation, he continued: "The war is a large wastage of lives, money and property. The president says the country will undergo a massive development after the war ends. If that is so, it is good."

There are illusions among some workers that the end of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will bring better conditions. In the main, these illusions reflect intense government and media

propaganda.

However, Priyantha and others were keen to discuss the attitude of the SEP, which is the only party calling for the withdrawal of troops from the North and East of the island. As SEP campaigners explained, the war has been used to divide workers along communal lines and make working people pay for the crisis of capitalism.

A group of male workers at a junction voiced their hatred of the mainstream political parties. Susantha, who works for Flora, a paper serviette producer, said he did not believe in any party or politician. "I am now 32. After my first election, I didn't vote for anyone. Why should I? No one is speaking on behalf of us.

"This estate is situated in the electorate of Homagama. Trade and Commerce Minister Bandula Gunawardena represents this seat. This estate is collapsing. Thousands have lost their jobs. He is deaf and blind on this issue. What is the JVP [opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna] doing? In the past they talked about workers, but they did nothing. I have no party to vote for."

After a lengthy discussion about the war and the deepening global recession and its causes and the SEP's policies, Susantha commented: "This is the first time I came across this program. I would like to discuss it further before I decide about my vote."

While talking with a housewife, her husband angrily interrupted, demanding to know the purpose of our visit. He was in his sixties. He asked: "Before this economic collapse, there was no movement which warned the working class. Where were you?"

SEP supporters explained that the SEP and its predecessor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) had been warning for the past four decades about the developing breakdown of the capitalist system.

He recognised the name of the RCL. He had been a member of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), formerly a Trotskyist party that betrayed the working class by entering a bourgeois government led by Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964. He remembered a lecture in 1969 given by Keerthi Balasuriya, the RCL's founding general secretary, at Jayawardanepura University, in which Balasuriya had explained the emerging world crisis.

"Before it joined with the SLFP, I attended an LSSP regional conference where the party leaders tried to justify the coalition. One leader, Osmond Jayaratna, said that even after entering the SLFP government, the party would not abandon the independence of working class.

"To justify the betrayal, the LSSP leaders told so many

lies. They said Bolsheviks had joined Kerensky's coalition government in Russia in 1917. We believed that because we had not studied the history of the Russian Revolution." He explained that many members had been discouraged and confused by the LSSP's conduct. He wished the SEP success.

An education department worker, who also runs a boarding house to help support his family, described the situation facing many of his tenants. After losing their jobs, they did not immediately return to their villages, but tried to survive by doing other jobs. Soon they were unable to pay the monthly rent. Although he allowed them to stay a few months, he finally had to tell them to go.

Sanjeewanee is working at a tea packing factory for a monthly salary of just 6,000 rupees. With allowances and overtime, she can make another 2,000 rupees. She spends 1,300 rupees on rent, sharing a room of just 100 square feet with four others. For meals she has to spend about 4,000 rupees.

"I cannot save a single cent for my parents who are struggling in the village to feed and educate my younger brothers and sisters. Many married workers left the factory since they could not feed their children from this pittance," she said.

"Next weekend we are going home for the New Year festival. As a tradition we have to present something to our family members. However, since the tea demand has fallen, this year we haven't had any overtime. Management says the market has been badly affected by the international crisis. In this slump our jobs are not secure."

Before leaving the estate, the team went to a small hotel for a cup of tea. Asked about the impact of the closure of factories on her business, Mala Kanthi Jayasinghe explained: "I started this restaurant in 2003. Until the beginning of last year, I earned more than 30,000 rupees a month. Now I earn less than 9,000 rupees." She said she would have to close the hotel soon.

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