

Sri Lankan plantation and railway workers condemn Maruti Suzuki frame-up

By our correspondents
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Workers on the tea plantations in Sri Lanka's hill country, and railway workers in the capital of Colombo have expressed support for the International Committee of the Fourth International's (ICFI) campaign to free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in India.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters took the campaign to the plantations and railway workers' quarters in Ratmalana, a southern outer suburb of Colombo. Plantation workers are the poorest section of the working class. Most of the families of the estimated 200,000 workers live in small line rooms without basic necessities like basic health care and drinking water.

Plantation workers are paid poverty level daily wages of less than US \$5. With the support of the unions, the companies have implemented a wage system based on productivity—similar to a sharecropper system—to preserve profits under conditions of declining tea exports and income.

Last year the workers rebelled against the unions, which conspired with the companies and the government to introduce the system. As a result of the campaign waged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the workers of Deeside Estate in Maskeliya formed a workers action committee, independent of the unions, to take forward the struggle for decent wages and improved living and working conditions.

The Deeside Estate Workers Action Committee unanimously passed the following resolution demanding the release of the Maruti Suzuki workers:

“We, the Deeside Estate Workers Action Committee, strongly denounce the life sentences imposed on 13 Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in India and the three-to-five-year prison terms on another 18 workers by an Indian court on March 18. We demand the release all of the workers immediately.

“As we came to know through the *World Socialist Web Site*, the conviction and sentencing of the workers was the outcome of a frame-up mounted jointly by Japan-based Maruti Suzuki management, the Haryana state government and the central government of India.

“Attacks against Maruti Suzuki workers are a warning to the international working class. This is a part of the war declared by international capital on workers to exploit labor power and increase their profit under conditions of the growing crisis of world capitalism. We also faced similar attacks in February 2015.

“Eight workers who were in the forefront of a strike against increased workload were arrested and removed from their jobs by our estate management. Plantation trade unions lined up with the management and police in this attack.

“Only the Socialist Equality Party fought for their release and reinstatement. Through the lessons of those struggles we formed an action committee in our estate independent from trade unions.

“Plantation companies are working to dismantle their estates and to transform workers into contract or casual employees. Thus, those companies aim to increase their profits by abolishing even limited rights won by workers through their past struggles.

“Workers must unite internationally to fight these attacks and against pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions.

“Workers of the world, unite.”

SEP supporters also campaigned among workers on the Deeside estate in Up Cot and the Maskeliya and Lonach estates at Watawala in Nuwara-Eliya district. They distributed the ICFI statement “Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers.”

G. Wilfred from Deeside estate said, “Court

sentences against Maruti Suzuki workers are brutal.

This is a warning to the international working class. We had a similar experience on our estate. In 2015, seven other workers and I were witch-hunted on fake charges that the estate supervisor used to attack us. After several months, the case was dismissed and we were reinstated because of workers' opposition and the campaign that was waged by your party to defend us."

M. Fernando, a retired worker of Deeside estate, said, "I was shocked when I heard about this attack on the Indian workers. We normally watch several Indian channels on TV but none of them reported on this serious attack. Also, I don't hear that any political party or trade union has opposed it. I've only heard about this case through your campaign."

K. Manoharan from Lonach estate, added, "The life sentence is equal to a death penalty.

How can they give this type of punishment to workers who fought for their rights? It can't be accepted."

He said that Watawala Plantation Company, which runs the estate, has abandoned tea cultivation in nearly 70 hectares and is going to hand over a part of the estate to an Australian company for a dairy farm. "The workers will lose their jobs. The trade unions support this attack."

Railway workers in Ratmalana said it was very important to learn how workers are treated elsewhere. They said they only know what happens around them and that no one speaks to them about issues like the Maruti Suzuki frame up.

P.K. Udaya Kumara, a railway foundry worker, said, "The workers must come forward to get these Indian workers released. We must organize internationally. Also we must wage a tireless fight. As railway workers, we won our permanency [full-time positions] only through a struggle."

Denouncing all the parties of the political establishment for abandoning the interests of workers and the poor and only looking out for their own privileges, he said, "We are suffering. Parties like JVP (Peoples Liberation Front) who talk about socialism are also the same. They show red banners but are working for capitalists' interest."

He explained that his father was a supporter of JVP in the 1960s but that he was disgusted by the JVP's activities. "I am a member of SLFP (Sri Lanka

Freedom Party) union. But they do nothing to win our demands. They are part of the ruling elite. I salute you for your international campaign."

R.S. Jayaratne, an office worker in Ratmalana railway workshop, said, "It's interesting to know that such an international party exists. I came to this house recently and this is the first time I met your party.

"This case against Maruti workers is unfair and unjustified. Workers are always suppressed by the moneyed class. This punishment shows how brutal the ruling class is. This is relevant not only to India, but to the whole world. That is why I say your campaign is inspiring in rallying the workers of the world around this campaign. This is a good effort." He signed the online petition launched by the ICFI demanding the release of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

Another worker, Viraj Silva, said: "I think workers must fight for equality. This punishment affects the workers of the whole world. We must stop this through a powerful campaign. Even though I may not totally agree with your politics I totally agree with this campaign."

The worker said he also leases a three-wheeler taxi for part-time work. "We cannot survive on one salary. We work on Sundays. This is the plight of workers everywhere and this is the reason why the Maruti Suzuki workers tried to organize against their meager salaries."

T. Susantha said, "This punishment by an Indian court is relevant to Sri Lankan workers. As a railway worker here in Sri Lanka I express my solidarity with victimized Maruti workers. I totally agree with your international campaign."

Thilanga Ratnayake added, "What I would simply say is this verdict is totally unjustifiable and I support this international campaign wholeheartedly."

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