

Sri Lankan plantation workers support campaign to release framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers

By M. Thevarajah
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Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka campaigned in several tea estates in the hill country to discuss an SEP picket and public meeting to be held on May 21 in Hatton to defend the victimized Maruti Suzuki workers in India.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has launched the campaign and online petition to free 13 Maruti Suzuki workers who were sentenced to life imprisonment.

The workers were framed-up by the Japanese-owned car giant, supported by the police, the judiciary and political establishment, including the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Just nine days ago, Modi addressed Tamil-speaking tea plantation workers at a meeting near Hatton, posturing as a champion of their rights. Discredited plantation unions gathered tens of thousands of workers to hear Modi's boasting.

Modi also claimed that India would provide support to improve the living conditions of Sri Lankan plantation workers. However, tea plantation workers in India face dire living and working conditions, including in states like Assam in the northeast and Tamil Nadu in the south.

During the latter part of 19th century, plantation workers were forcibly brought to Sri Lanka by British colonial rulers as semi-slave laborers. The first act of the Sri Lankan ruling class to whom the British granted power in 1948 was the abolition of citizenship rights for plantation workers. In 1963, under the reactionary Sirima-Shastri Agreement (named after then Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike and her Indian counterpart Lal Bahdur Shastri), hundreds of thousands were deported to India. Those deported and

their children have become destitute in Tamil Nadu.

The plantation unions in Sri Lanka collaborated with successive governments and the plantation companies to subordinate the workers to profit interests. With the help of the unions and the government, the companies are now planning to transform workers into share croppers to intensify their exploitation.

SEP members campaigned for the last several days among workers at the Welioya, Fordyce, Ingestre and Lonach estates situated around Hatton.

The plantation workers are one of the poorest sections of the Sri Lankan working class, living on poverty-level wages of less than five dollars a day. Most of the nearly 200,000 families in estates are living in decades-old accommodations without adequate water, health services and proper education facilities for their children.

The workers condemned the attack on the Maruti Suzuki workers and explained their difficult working and living conditions.

A worker from Fordyce estate said that workers' conditions in every country are getting worse. "A life sentence for 13 workers is intolerable. How their families will suffer!" He referred to Modi's promise to build 10,000 houses for plantation workers. "But the same government has punished Maruti-Suzuki workers who fight for their rights."

He said that he saw on the TV news a story about daily suicides among Indian farmers who are unable to settle their loans. The Karnataka state government had refused to give water to Tamil Nadu farmers. "I think Modi came to Sri Lanka not to help for us, but to develop a close relationship with the government against China. I saw news yesterday the Sri Lankan

government refused to allow a Chinese submarine to come to Sri Lanka.”

He sarcastically said that the leaders of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the National Union of Workers (NUW) competed with each other to organize a ceremony for Modi to get his favor for their own interests, not the interests of workers. “They are always working to divide the workers. I like the socialist policy, and I will come your meeting,” he added.

A worker at the Ingestre estate who was victimized during the plantation workers’ wage struggle last year said, “With my own experience I can understand the frame-up of the Maruti-Suzuki workers. It is clear that company management purposely victimized the workers who are at the forefront of struggles for the rights of the workers. Similarly, seven workers in our estate including myself were victimized last year during the wage struggle.

“CWC, which called the strike for a 1,000-rupee daily wage, stopped the struggle without winning our demand. We continued the protest an additional two days and picketed in front of the manager’s bungalow. After that, the armed forces intervened and arrested seven workers and detained them for a week under false charges. They were then suspended for several months.”

He said that they would not have been released and reinstated if the SEP and WSWS had not waged a fight to defend them. After the workers were reinstated, they were transferred to other divisions of the estate and now must walk six to seven kilometers a day.

“As you said, workers must unite all over the world and fight to defend their rights,” he said.

A female worker from Welioya said, “I hear for the first time of the severe punishment for the Maruti Suzuki workers. I thought that India was different from Sri Lanka, and that workers enjoyed some rights. Now it is clear all we are facing a similar situation.”

She said that currently she was not working because of the difficult working conditions. “The management does not clear the estate. So leeches and snakes are always biting us. Our wages are not enough even for food. Every day management reduces even the meager facilities we enjoyed earlier. We have no water facilities now, and houses are not repaired. We still live in very old line rooms.”

Another female worker from the Fordyce estate said

that she supports the Maruti Suzuki campaign and spoke about the harsh working conditions in her estate. “The management of our tea factory has recruited more female workers for low wages. Some portions of the estate were handed over to a private contractor for clearing. He recruits workers on a casual basis and pays only 500 rupees per day. All the trade unions that are closely collaborating with the management are supporting this plan. Sometimes union leaders themselves take the contract. I heard that in some portions of the Battlegala estate a revenue-sharing system has been implemented. Under this we will lose everything previously we had.”

She was referring to a new system to be introduced in the plantation akin to a share cropper system.

The WSWS spoke to a group of youth from the Ingestre estate. One said, “We support your campaign to release the Maruti Suzuki workers. We saw their photo from your notice. They are very young workers. Life sentence is a brutal punishment. How can their families and children live without their support? Modi came here and spoke about supporting the plantation workers here, but he suppresses workers there.”

The youth said that they voted against the Rajapakse government and for the present government. “But this government is no better,” one said. “Prices are increasing. There are no jobs for youth. We do not trust anybody. All have cheated us.”

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