

Sri Lanka: SEP holds meeting and picket in Hatton for release of Maruti Suzuki workers

By our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members and supporters held a successful picket and public meeting in Hatton on May 21 to demand the immediate release of the framed-up Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in India. Hatton is a major town in Sri Lanka's central hill country plantation district.

In March, 13 workers from Maruti Suzuki's Manesar car assembly plant in the north Indian state of Haryana were sentenced to life imprisonment on bogus murder charges. Their only "crime" was to fight against the brutal working conditions inside the global corporation's factory.

The SEP picket and public meeting were held a little more than a week after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the area to address a meeting of estate workers organised by the plantation trade unions. Modi's posturing as a friend of plantation workers is exposed by his government's brutal treatment of the Maruti Suzuki workers, in particular, and the Indian working class in general.

The SEP/IYSSE picket, held near the Hatton bus stand, won the attention of hundreds of estate workers, housewives and young people. SEP and International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) statements in defence of the framed-up Suzuki workers were distributed in the town. Plantation workers travelled from Maskeliya, Dickoya and Kotagala to attend the meeting.

Banner and placards displayed in the picket line read: "Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers!" "Fight for international socialism against the suppression of social and democratic rights!" "Build the working class revolutionary party!" and "Fight for a Union of Socialist Republics in South Asia."

Two Tamil dailies—*Virakesari* and *Thinakkural*—and

the ~~Sri Lanka~~ *Lankadeepa* reported on daily the in the online and printed editions of their newspapers, and the leading private channel, Sirasa TV, covered the event.

SEP and IYSSE members campaigned at the estates around Hatton and Maskeliya in the weeks leading up to the picket and meeting. Maskeliya plantation workers signed the online petition demanding freedom for the Maruti Suzuki workers, as did workers from the Glenugie and Deeside estates, where the workers established an action committee to fight for their rights under the leadership of the SEP.

Explaining his support for the campaign, S. Ramar from Deeside estate said: "The Maruti Suzuki workers fought to overcome their problems, like we did. I regard them as our people and face the same problems. They should be immediately released."

SEP political committee member M. Devarajah, who chaired the May 21 meeting, began by explaining that the life imprisonment of the 13 Suzuki workers and the jailing another 18 for three to five years was a "declaration of war" by the Indian government against the working class. The Indian court's verdict, he said was a political decision and a "warning, not only for Indian workers, but workers throughout the world."

Devarajah drew a parallel with the plantation workers at the Ingestre and Deeside estates who were arrested and sacked on framed-up charges last year because they remained on strike after the unions betrayed the campaign for higher wages and against increased productivity. "All the trade unions collaborated with the management in this frame-up. Only the SEP and *World Socialist Web Site* fought for their release and reinstatement," he said.

T. Sambandan, a leading SEP member from Jaffna, addressed the meeting. "Governments around the

world,” he said, “are offering the working class to the transnational corporations as cheap labour. The frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers is a part of the repression against any worker who fights against sweatshop conditions.”

The speaker explained that Indian Finance Minister Arun Jaitley visited Japan early this month and met with Osamu Suzuki, owner of the Suzuki corporation. Following this meeting the company agreed to invest \$US880 million in the Indian state of Gujarat.

Sambandan said workers could only defend their basic rights as part of the fight to abolish the profit system. “Sri Lankan plantation workers and the war victims in the North should unite with the workers in the south of the island and across the Indian subcontinent under the socialist banner,” he stated.

SEP political committee member W.A. Sunil was the final speaker. He explained why it was necessary to fight for the release of the jailed Suzuki workers and through that build the unity of the international working class.

Commenting on the Indian prime minister’s visit to the Sri Lankan plantations, Sunil said the plantation unions were desperately fighting each other to “embrace” Modi.

“The trade unions are not concerned about workers’ rights,” he said, but do everything they can to subordinate estate workers to company profits. “They are collaborating with the companies and the government to impose a share-cropper system that will wipe out all the limited rights workers won in previous struggles ...

“Under conditions of a deepening economic crisis, international finance capital cannot maintain its profits and the rights won by working class in the past century. Without forging the international unity, the working class cannot win or defend its rights or defeat the worldwide attacks of financial capital,” he said.

The court verdict against the Maruti Suzuki workers, he continued, was an assurance by Indian authorities to the global companies that it would crush any working class opposition that affects investors. “It is also a warning to working people about what is in store if they resist slave labour conditions,” he said.

Sunil pointed to the increasing repression of workers and use of court orders by the Sri Lankan government of President Maithripala Sirisena. Workers cannot

defend their rights with old methods, he said, they need an alternative program and perspective—the fight for international socialism.

Several people remained after the meeting to discuss the international campaign to release the Suzuki workers. Nadarajah from Kotagala said: “What happened to the Maruti Suzuki workers is unjust. While you are fighting to unite all workers around the globe to release them and to fight for workers’ rights, all the other parties are supporting the bourgeoisie. You are fighting for socialism and I support you.”

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