

Sri Lanka: Action committee of Abbotsleigh Estate workers holds inaugural meeting

By our correspondents
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The Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee, formed by plantation workers with the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), held its official inauguration meeting on Sunday evening.

The main objective of the gathering, held in a hall near the Abbotsleigh tea factory, was to discuss the objectives of the committee, the difference between an action committee and a trade union and to draw lessons from the recent concerted strike by tens of thousands of plantation workers for higher wages. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) called off the strike last Wednesday but protests continued for two days.

B. Munnusamy, a local leader of the National Union of Workers (NUW), attempted to sabotage the meeting by threatening to tip off the plantation management and the police about the gathering and its attendees. The NUW, along with the Democratic People's Front (DPF) and the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF), opposed the strike outright, but many of their members stopped work anyway. All of the unions, including the CWC, are fearful of the rebelliousness of plantation workers who are currently paid a poverty-level daily wage of just 500 rupees or \$US2.80.

The strike greatly exacerbated the political crisis in Colombo, following President Maithripala Sirisena's unconstitutional sacking of Ranil Wickremesinghe and installation of former president Mahinda Rajapakse as prime minister on October 26. All the plantation unions, which also function as political parties, are aligned with one or other of the rival bourgeois factions and are deeply hostile to any independent movement of the working class. The CWC only called the strike to pre-empt a rebellion by workers over pay and conditions.

SEP members at Sunday's meeting countered the NUW provocateur by exposing the pro-company role

of the NUW, forcing him to retreat. Despite the threats, a number of workers from the Abbotsleigh division participated along with SEP members and supporters.

Sundaralingam, a worker from the Abbotsleigh estate, chaired the meeting. SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena delivered the main report, which was unanimously approved. His speech was translated into Tamil by M. Thevarajah.

Wijesiriwardena conveyed the warmest revolutionary greetings from the SEP and WSWs to the plantation workers and the Abbotsleigh action committee and praised their determined struggle. He pledged the SEP's continuing political support for their fight against the companies and the government for decent wages and better working and living conditions.

The speaker explained that the wages struggle by Sri Lankan plantation workers was part of a growing rebellion by the working class internationally against the trade unions, the capitalist state, the corporations and the whole capitalist establishment.

"Last Sunday, in a public meeting held in Detroit in the United States, a resolution was passed to build rank-and-file committees to fight against GM plant closures. The "yellow vest" movement, which started in France, is now spreading over Europe and to the Middle East. Workers in India are engaged in class struggles," he said.

Wijesiriwardena pointed to the role of the WSWs in unifying these class struggles globally. He quoted some of the comments by WSWs readers, in response to the coverage of the plantation workers' strike, that warmly welcomed the initiative taken by the Abbotsleigh workers to form an action committee in opposition to the trade unions.

"When you, a little group of workers, were picketing in Fruit Hill junction in Hatton, you might not have

thought that you were going to make an impact on the world, but you have made such an impression.”

“It is not a matter of numbers,” the speaker continued, referring to concerns expressed at the limited numbers at the meeting. What was significant, he said, was the striving of workers to organize independently and class consciously. He stressed the necessity of workers to draw lessons from their own struggles and reviewed how the strike movement emerged in opposition to the attempts of the unions to suppress it.

Wijesiriwardena pointed out that workers have no say in the trade unions. “All the decisions are made behind closed doors with the plantation association, and then they are imposed upon you by the unions.” He explained that, under conditions of globalized production, the unions around the world have been transformed into an instrument of the employers and governments.

“When you are striking for a higher wage in Sri Lanka you are in a fight not only with the plantation companies but also with the huge corporations that own this global production chain. That is why we need to be organized as an international class. The unions oppose this unity,” he said.

Wijesiriwardena concluded his speech by saying: “In contrast to the unions, an action committee arrives at its decisions through democratic discussions. Most importantly it must recognize that the irresolvable crisis of capitalism means it must be based on the perspective of international socialism.”

The meeting adopted two resolutions unanimously.

The first resolution, entitled “Defeat the attacks of capitalist governments and employers,” called for the organization of “a unified movement of the working class to defend jobs and for decent wages and living conditions.” Recognising that the rights of workers can no longer be defended by the unions, it called for the building of independent action committees, democratically elected by workers in all plantations, factories and worksites. These committees have to take the initiative to organize the struggle for the social and democratic rights of the working class against the onslaught of capitalist governments and employers.

The second resolution declared the solidarity of the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee with the French workers engaged in the “yellow vest”

movement, and pledged to support the US SEP’s campaign to defend the jobs of 15,000 General Motors workers in North America. It called for the industrial might of the international working class to be mobilized to free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers in India.

In the discussion, Sivapakyam, a female worker who helped initiate the action committee, spoke about the “revenue sharing” scheme that the unions and the plantation companies are attempting to foist onto workers, transforming them and their families into share croppers.

“The union has told us that they are discussing the wages issue, and if a settlement cannot be reached the plantation will be divided among workers. Now the plantations are maintained by outside workers, but when this [revenue sharing] method is introduced we will have to do that labour also. We do not buy their claims that we could earn 80,000 rupees [a month] when this new method is introduced,” she said.

Sivapakyam said that there were a number of factors that should be considered when deciding what wage was necessary for a decent living. At present, workers have to compromise their daily meals in order to send their children on an annual school trip. She also stressed that women workers should participate in the action committee.

Sundaralingam told the WSWs after the meeting: “I have been working in trade union affairs for 20 or 25 years. But I have never participated in a gathering such as this one, which takes decisions democratically and educates workers politically. I learned what capitalist exploitation is. The capitalist decides our wages considering his profits concerns and not considering what we need for a better living. That is what he calls a just settlement. Workers of the world must be united, without that unity we cannot win our demands.

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