

Sri Lanka: Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee and SEP hold powerful conference

By our correspondents
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The Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a well-attended conference at the Hatton Town Hall in Sri Lanka's tea growing district in the central hills on March 17.

Entitled "The lessons of the plantation workers' struggle and way forward to win higher wages and democratic rights," the event attracted over 100 people, including more than 30 estate workers, workers from a diverse range of trades, university students and housewives. Around 20 SEP members and supporters travelled from Sri Lanka's war-ravaged Northern Province to participate.

The conference, which was held after weeks of campaigning in tea estates, urban industrial areas and at the universities, unanimously passed resolutions demanding the release of jailed Maruti-Suzuki workers in India and freedom for WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and US whistleblower Chelsea Manning.

S. Kandipan, a worker from the Glenugie Estate Maskeliya and a member of the SEP, chaired the event. The unions' betrayal of the plantation workers' wage struggle, he said, vindicated the long-held analysis of the SEP and the WSWS that the trade unions "no longer represent or defend the interests of the working class. The unions have become instruments of the ruling class."

The companies, the government and the unions "are on one side and the workers the other," he said, and explained that the decision by Abbotsleigh estate workers to establish their own action committee was "an example to all other workers."

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah presented the main report, describing the conference as "a clear expression of the international resurgence of the working class."

Thevarajah pointed out that the plantation workers' wage struggle was in response to constant attacks on their living conditions. "The demand for a 100 percent increase in the basic daily wage came from the workers. As protests developed throughout plantations against the companies' outright rejection of their demand, the largest union in the estate sector, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), called a strike in order to dissipate workers' anger."

The union called off the strike after seven days citing a bogus promise by President Maithripala Sirisena that he would resolve the wage issue.

"But estate workers remained on strike for another two days.

The plantation struggle developed as a rebellion against unions, which culminated in the Abbotsleigh estate workers taking the initiative to form an action committee under the guidance of the SEP."

The speaker referred to the attempts of Abbotsleigh Estate management, with the support of the unions, to witch hunt S. Suntharalingam, chairman of the action committee, as well as its members. The assistant manager of Abbotsleigh even assigned Suntharalingam to special duties on March 17, to prevent him participating in the workers' conference in Hatton. Several Abbotsleigh workers, however, attended the event in defiance of management threats.

Thevarajah explained that the ruling classes internationally were attempting to impose the full burden of the escalating crisis of the world capitalist system on the working class. "The plantation companies in Sri Lanka are doing the same thing," he said. "They demand that tea production costs must be reduced in order to compete in the international market but are not ready to sacrifice any part of their profits.

"While these companies earn massive profits and their CEOs are paid huge salaries, estate workers' daily wage has only risen by a pittance of just 20 rupees in the sell-out collective agreement signed between the employers and the unions. At the same time the daily target for plucking leaves has been increased," he said.

Thevarajah pointed out that the companies were pushing for the abolition of the wage system via the allocation of small plots of land to workers and their transformation into tenant farmers or modern-day bonded labour. "Entire families will be dragged into maintaining these plots," he warned.

The wage struggle by plantation workers, the speaker said, confirmed that Sri Lankan workers, like the fellow workers around the world, cannot win or secure their rights through the unions or by pressuring or appealing to bourgeois governments or employers.

"Large-scale estates, factories, and banks should be brought under the democratic ownership and control of the working class," he said, "and the global economy re-organised to provide for the needs of the majority of the society instead of serving capitalist profits."

Thevarajah appealed to workers in all the estates and in other sectors to break with the unions, establish their own action

committees and unify those organisations to fight the attacks of the capitalist class and the government.

“The implementation of a socialist program requires the bringing to power of a workers’ and peasants’ government as part of the struggle for socialism on an international scale,” he explained.

Several audience members spoke during the lively discussion session at the conference.

Thanabalan from Hanthana Estate, which is run by the government-controlled Janatha Estate Development Board, told the conference that management failed to properly maintain the estate and keep it clean and free of weeds. “They keep it clean along the road side because tourist buses pass through the area,” he said.

“Government ministers and politicians have gradually taken control of Hanthana Estate lands but the estate workers still have to work on these properties, and now there are small hotels emerging from this land.”

Thanabalan said that estate managements terminate workers when they reach retirement age but do not pay their pension funds. “There’s been no platform to reveal these issues. I came here today to expose these things.”

A female worker from Bloomfield Estate said: “They say that they have increased our [daily] salary up to 700 rupees. In reality they increased it by just 20 rupees, but in the meantime the price of essential goods keeps going up. Management demands 16 kilos of tea leaves in order to get a full day’s salary.

“I want to know why our children have to grow up as estate workers and deal with the suffering and lack of education we face? Shouldn’t we change this situation?”

Devika, a Colombo harbour worker, said the conference revealed to her the real situation facing plantation workers. Estate workers were major income earners for Sri Lanka, she said, and there had to be a solution to the problems they confronted.

Pointing to the situation facing Colombo harbour workers, she explained that the government is trying to privatise the eastern part of the port. “If it happens, it would have a severe effect on the massive work force in the port. The problems inside the port are covered up by the activities of the port trade unions.”

Mayuran from Peradeniya University told the conference that it was 71 years since Sri Lanka gained independence but “the basic problems of the people remain unsolved.” He reminded the audience of the reactionary decision to abolish the citizenship rights of plantation workers in 1948 and how the ruling class continues to employ racist policies to divide the working class today.

Mayuran said that the university students in the North and East of Sri Lanka organised protests in support of the striking plantation workers. “And I can assure you, that the students will raise their voices for estate workers in the future,” he said.

An Abbotsleigh worker said: “I’m happy to attend this conference as a member of the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers’ Action Committee. Several people have delivered good speeches here today. Only by participating in this sort of conference can we talk about and understand the problems in our society and discuss how to solve it.

“Two weeks ago I came here to participate in the release of the Tamil book of *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century* by David North. On the way home I thought what I would achieve if I joined [the SEP]? At home I read two pages of the book and asked my daughter to read those pages. The money for this book has not been wasted because there are many important things explained. We should all carefully read the sentences in this sort of book.”

Sulakshana, a young woman from one estate, spoke about the so-called revenue-sharing or share-cropping system. “The education of estate children will be affected by this revenue sharing system. More burdens will be imposed on workers. If the children become workers then the capitalists will exploit them too.

“Estate workers, who have been oppressed for 150 years,” she said, “will face slave-like conditions under this system and they should reject it completely. We should break from the unions [and], as the SEP has explained, democratically elect action committees. The solution will come only if a revolution comes.”

In his concluding remarks to the conference, K. Ratnayake, national editor of the WSWS, said the Hatton event represented a new stage of the development of working-class struggle.

“Abbotsleigh workers took a bold and progressive initiative to break the from unions and organise independently to fight for their rights,” he said. “This is part of an international development as is shown by workers at General Motors moving to establish rank and file committees.

“Plantation companies are demanding the abolition of the wage system and the establishment of a bonded labour system. International conglomerates, such as Unilever and Tata, demand low cost production in order to accumulate massive profits,” he said. This exploitation, he explained, was a global process. “There is no national solution to these attacks. Workers can fight only by organising internationally and fighting for socialism.”

Ratnayake told the conference that the Sri Lankan ruling elite was in an advanced state of decay. “The ruling United National Party, President Sirisena and the opposition led by former President Mahinda Rajapakse have no solution to the problems facing the masses and are all preparing in their own ways to impose autocratic forms of rule.

“This is a ruling class that waged a 30-year war against its own people, that is, a communal war against the Tamil people,” he said and urged all those in attendance to join the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, and build it as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.

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