

Seven Sri Lankan families homeless after plantation fire

By M. Thevarajah
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Seven families at the Menikwatta Estate third division, near Dickoya in central Sri Lanka were rendered homeless on May 9, after their line room homes were destroyed in sudden fire.

Thirty people, including children, were displaced and forced to move to a church on the estate. The emergency accommodation, however, lacked basic facilities and the following day they had to move in with relatives.

The fire erupted in the morning during work hours. Three houses were completely gutted and another four partially damaged.

While workers rushed to the scene and were able to prevent the fire from spreading to other houses, three families lost their clothes, identity cards, birth certificates, children's school books and domestic utensils. The other four families lost most of their belongings.

Estate management put tin sheets on the roofs of the burnt-out line rooms but the families have refused to reoccupy them because they are unsafe in the rainy season.

About 150 workers are employed at the Menikwatta Estate third division which is owned by the Wanarajah Group of estates and managed by the Bogavanthalawa Plantation Company. The Wanarajah Group employs 5,000 workers.

Many poorly built plantation houses are destroyed by fires every year in Sri Lanka. In fact, the May 9 fire is the second such incident this month. On May 2, 14 line rooms were burnt out at the Abbotsleigh Estate at Hatton.

* In April 2011, 20 line rooms were gutted by fire at the Maskeliya Brunswick Estates. Another fire seriously damaged several line rooms at the same estate in January 2016.

* In May 2012, 22 homes were destroyed at Mocha Estate at Maskeliya, displacing about 100 people.

* In November 2014, over 80 people were homeless after 22 homes were gutted by a fire at the Dayagama plantation near Nuwara-Eliya.

* On December 29, 2018 about 20 homes were destroyed by a fire at the Fordyce Estate at Dickoya. It took more than a year before the plantation management provided the

workers with improvised homes.

* On January 29, a blaze destroyed 12 line rooms, devastating the homes of 66 people, including 21 children, at the Vanakadu Division of the Robgill Estate near Bogavanthalawa.

S. Chanrakanthi, 49, from Menikwatta Estate, told the *World Socialist Web Site* she had been at work when the fire broke out. "We heard about the fire but when we came back everything had burned down. It is very difficult to get back the things we have lost," she said.

A three-month drought has also impacted on the area, preventing tea pickers from reaching their daily 18-kilogram target and reducing their work to three or four days a week.

"We get only 700 rupees per day because our 1,000 rupees per day demand was rejected by the companies and the government. How can we live in this situation?" she asked.

In December 2018, plantation workers began a determined struggle, including an 11-day general strike and involving about 150,000 workers, to demand a 1,000-rupee basic salary. The strike was betrayed by the trade unions.

Chandrakanthi's retired husband, V. Myilvaganam, works on a casual basis. "The estate's assistant manager came to see the fire damage with local trade union leaders," he said. "They brought tin sheets to replace the damaged roofs but did not properly repair the houses. The trade unions are supporting the management, not us. Workers pay 250 rupees per month for the union subscription but this is in vain."

M. Thamilselvi, the couple's daughter, said: "My husband, who was working in Colombo, lost his job because of the coronavirus lockdown and came back home. He recently fell from a tree while cutting firewood so we're in a difficult situation because my parent's house was gutted. Our children were staying with them because we didn't have enough in our house."

Pushparaj is a construction worker, and his wife, who works at the estate children's welfare centre, lost many essential possessions in the fire. Pushparaj explained that his three children had been psychologically impacted by the fire and lost all their school books and note books.

Nearly 70 percent of Sri Lankan tea plantation workers live in dilapidated, tiny, barrack-like line rooms which were built during British colonial rule. Most line rooms are about 150 square feet with at least two families living in one room. The frequent fires are mainly caused by the substandard electricity supply system.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have promised to solve the housing crisis facing plantation workers but nothing is ever done. Although some homes have been built in parts of the extensive central hills plantation region, they are little different from the old-style line rooms.

M. Namashivayam, a father of three children in the same estate, is living in one of the newer houses. He explained that there are several such houses in his division and 50 more in two other divisions. Referring to the poor conditions in these homes, he said: "I've been living in an incomplete house that was given to me in 2011. It has no running water and we have to walk a long way to get water. There's no drainage system for waste water and so our children always get sick.

"When these buildings were originally handed over to us, only one room was completed. The floors of other rooms and the hall had not been cemented and there were no shutters on the windows. Living with children is very difficult in these buildings. Many workers refused this accommodation and so some of these houses are vacant," he said.

These "new" homes were originally given to workers and their families via a loan scheme established by the government of former President Mahinda Rajapakse in 2009. Monthly loan instalments are deducted from workers' wages and paid to the National Housing Department (NHD). Last year the NHD sent letters to workers warning of legal action if workers were unable to their pay loans.

While the estate management and local union leaders tried to block WSWS journalists from reporting on the latest fire and speaking to victims, the attempt failed.

Youth, who had recently returned from Colombo, after the government imposed its coronavirus national lockdown, explained the difficulties they now faced.

K. Lokeswaran said many young people had lost their jobs since the coronavirus pandemic. Although the government had promised that every jobless person would be paid 5,000 rupees every month, he had not received any of the promised relief in the past two months.

"Government officials say that if our parents are working in the estates then their children can't get this relief. But our parents' wage is not adequate for even their own expenses, let alone looking after us. When working in Colombo we were able to support them," he said.

M. Thushiyanthan, whose parents' home was wiped out in

the Menikwatta Estate fire, said: "My parents are still living with our relatives, but for two or three people to be living in one house is unsafe during the coronavirus situation. Our line system is a very dangerous place for spreading the pandemic. If somebody gets infected it will easily spread.

"The estate management previously supplied masks to some workers but they have now stopped it. Workers' wages are not enough to even buy a piece of soap to wash their hands."

The desperate social conditions facing workers at Menikwatta Estate are commonplace in every Sri Lankan estate and among workers more generally. Workers face increasing poverty, unemployment and deteriorating housing. The fight for healthy and safe housing is a major issue.

Plantation workers and other sections of the working class cannot overcome the desperate conditions they face through the trade unions. What is required is a political and organisational break with the pro-capitalist unions and the formation of independent, democratically-elected action committees.

The struggle to resolve the burning problems confronting plantation workers is bound up with the fight for a workers' and peasants' government and a socialist program to nationalise the large estates, big business and banks under the democratic control of the working class.

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