

A day in the life of a Sri Lankan tea worker

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Five days after Sri Lanka's new government was installed on November 23, the state-owned *Daily News* carried a front-page headline, "Urgent action to uplift estate workers." The article pompously announced that President Mahinda Rajapakse had instructed Milroy Fernando, the new plantation minister, to give priority to "uplifting the estate sector workers who have been perennially suffering abject poverty and misery".

A ministerial project report will supposedly "detail a wide range of shortcomings confronting the estate population, covering health, education, economic conditions, unemployment among estate youth, drinking water, land erosion, access road and passenger transport".

This is not the first time that plantation workers have heard pledges of this kind. Despite numerous past promises to improve living conditions, the situation facing workers continues to deteriorate. A World Bank report on Sri Lanka released early this year found that poverty among plantation workers increased by 50 percent over the decade from 1991-92 to 2002.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently visited the Kurukude division of the Aislaby estate, which is located near Bandarawela in the central hills, 210 kilometres from Colombo. The private estate is owned by Malwatte Valley Plantations. Approximately 1,300 workers are employed on the plantation and 50 families live in the Kurukude division. The terrible conditions faced by workers on the estate are indicative of those experienced by Sri Lanka's agricultural working class.

The plantation workers live in "line rooms," which are 5 or 6 small adjoining units. Each family's unit measures just 6 x 4 metres. The dwellings were first built by British colonial planters for workers brought from South India—forebears of the present plantation workers. With the expansion of workers' families from generation to generation, the tiny units have had to be partitioned with thin brick walls or polythene to provide accommodation for married couples. In some cases, two to three families have to share a single line house.

"I am 30 years old and a mother of three children," one

plantation worker told the WWSW. "I studied only up to grade 4. I have one younger brother and two younger sisters. Our father became ill and died when we were small. Our mother couldn't afford food and schooling for us, so we were not able to continue our education. My brother managed to go up to grade 10 only because my sisters and I started working in the estate when we were 14 and 15. I have been working here for about 15 years now, but have been unable to save any money."

On a typical day, this worker wakes up at 4.30 in the morning, in order to report to work at 7.30 a.m. In the morning she is so busy preparing breakfast for her children, getting them ready for school and attending her sick mother that she has no time for her own morning meal.

"My eldest child is eight years old and goes to school with other children in the estate," she continued. "She has to walk more than one and a half kilometres every school day in the morning and evening. What can I do? We can't afford to pay for school vans. I drop my two younger children at the crèche on my way to work. I also have to bring food and water for them and leave it at the crèche. I provide them rice with a single curry or roti [bread]. I only can give them milk in the morning."

Workers who pluck tea leaves begin at 8 a.m. and continue until 4 or 4.30 p.m. Supervisors shout at anyone who takes even a single minute's break during work hours, and management demands that each worker reach their harvest target of 18-20 kilograms of tea leaves per day, irrespective of whether there are enough tea leaves to pick or not.

"At noon we have our lunch break, after handing over our harvest," the plantation worker said. "By 12.15 p.m. I have usually returned home with my younger children after picking them up from the crèche. After attending to my children and eating the lunch I prepared in the morning, I hurry back to work.

"On the way home in the evening we collect firewood for cooking. It is about 5 to 5.30 p.m. by the time we return. We have a chance to sit down with our children

and have a shared meal only at night. By the end of the day we feel very tired and go to sleep at about 9 p.m. to start the same routine the following day.”

There are only three water taps for the 50 families on the division, and these operate for just 90 minutes each day. Workers are forced to queue to collect water for their families, and in the dry season they must go to a nearby village in search of water. Workers explained that Sinhalese villagers also have a water problem. Only plantation management staff are supplied with water from a tanker.

Sanitary facilities are in a terrible state. Two or three families are forced to share a single toilet, which has no water supply. A young female worker told the WSWS about the substandard health facilities on the estate. “Because essential medicines are not available at estate dispensary we have to go to the estate doctor’s bungalow,” she explained. “There is only Panadol, tablets and a liquid for cleaning wounds in the dispensary.”

Education facilities for Tamil-speaking plantation children are extremely poor. The Bandarawela educational zone requires about 800 teachers, but only 500 teachers are presently employed. Most of plantation youth have to abandon their education by grade 6 or 7, and in some cases even before then. No one from the Aislaby estate school has passed G.C.E. (ordinary level) since 1999.

Youth unemployment is rampant. Young people have lost all hope of finding work on the estate. Boys have left to find menial jobs as waiters or helpers in small hotels and shops in surrounding towns or in Colombo. The girls often have to work as domestic servants in the cities.

Even for those who find work harvesting tea leaves, wages are extremely low. As the plantation worker told the WSWS: “We would also like to have a decent life. But my three children, my mother and I all are maintained by my wage. My husband doesn’t have permanent work and is forced to rely on daily odd jobs. In the wet season he has difficulty finding work. To find a job in the town [Bandarawela] he has to spend about 22 rupees on bus fares to earn a wage of only 150-200 rupees [\$US1.50 to \$2] a day. However, Tamils have difficulty finding work.

“My wage is mainly spent on settling our monthly debts at the grocery. We buy on credit, and as the prices go up our debts go up too. I receive about 3,000-3,500 rupees per month. I can earn a 1,000 more in seasons with a good harvest. However, due to a lack of maintenance, the harvests are decreasing. When we become ill or face other trouble, we become further indebted.

“We are not interested in who becomes the president. We don’t have confidence in any leader. I am talking to you because I have known your party [the Socialist Equality Party] for a long time and what you said has come true.”

There are a number of trade unions on the estates, such as the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Up Country People’s Front (UPF) and Red Flag. “They are doing nothing except collecting our monthly dues,” the plantation worker declared contemptuously.

Tamil plantation workers are among the most impoverished and oppressed layers of the working class. Immediately after independence in 1948, the government stripped them of their citizenship rights in an effort to whip up communal divisions between Tamil and Sinhala workers. A 1963 pact between New Delhi and Colombo saw hundreds of thousands of people deported to South India. Other Tamil estate workers have managed to gain citizenship over a number of years, but they are still treated as second-class citizens.

Plantation workers are burdened with onerous work, paid poverty-level wages and provided with terrible living facilities. The estate owners, on the other hand, reap large profits. A recent report published in the Sri Lankan press highlighted the earnings of Malwatte Valley Plantations, which owns the Aislaby estate. In the three months to June 30 this year, the firm recorded a gross profit of 65 million rupees. In 2004, the company’s gross profit totalled 228 million rupees.

The present government has no intention of altering this system of exploitation any more than previous ones. President Rajapakse’s promises of “uplifting plantation workers” are just as empty as those made to other sections of the working class and rural poor. What will be implemented is the agenda of the IMF and World Bank, which will further erode the already appalling living standards facing many workers.



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