

Sri Lankan plantation workers angry at unions and government

Our correspondents
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking plantation workers in different areas in Sri Lanka over the past week as their pay campaign was sabotaged and finally shut down altogether by the leaderships of all the trade unions. The workers expressed their anger and opposition to the role of the unions and the failure of President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government to support their demands.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and its allied union, which opposed the strike from the outset, signed a deal with employers on Tuesday that was significantly less than the strikers' demand. The CWC leadership was only able to carry out this betrayal because it had the tacit support of the United Peoples Front (UPF), which had called the strike, but was increasingly concerned over the looming confrontation with the Rajapakse government.

CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman and UPF leader Periyasamy Chandrasekaran are both cabinet ministers. At a special cabinet meeting on December 15, Rajapakse called on the UPF to end the strike, which he claimed was damaging the economy. Chandrasekaran convened a meeting of union delegates in Hatton last Sunday but faced a barrage of opposition from workers after deputy labour minister Mervin Silva argued they should accept the employers' offer.

The following day, Chandrasekaran wrote to the CWC leadership encouraging them to take "a valuable new approach" in opening up negotiations with employers. The resulting deal, which Chandrasekaran hailed as "a victory," fell well short of the strike demand of a daily wage of 300 rupees (\$US3). The CWC signed a two-year agreement with a base rate of just 170 rupees, together with a 90-rupee allowance conditional on attendance and prices. Most workers will not receive the full allowance.

The other unions, including the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU) affiliated to the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), have all fallen into line. On Monday, the JVP declared it would call a general strike of its unions if the plantation workers did not receive the full 300 rupees. By Wednesday, the ACPWU leadership claimed that it had no choice but to call for a return to work. No mention was made of a general strike.

Significantly, the two-week strike by a half-million plantation workers involved significant layers of Sinhala workers as well as Tamil-speaking workers who form the majority of the plantation workforce. The response was all the more significant as it took place as the Rajapakse government is whipping up anti-Tamil chauvinism to justify plunging the country back to civil war.

The determination of strikers to pursue their campaign stands in stark contrast to the opportunist manoeuvres of the union leaderships, which back the government and its intensifying offensives against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Far from defending the rights of workers, the unions are the mechanism for imposing Rajapakse's demand for the working class to bear the burdens of the war.

Such was the disgust and anger among workers at the agreement signed on Tuesday, that many refused to return to work. The full extent of this

ongoing protest has not been widely reported. In its news bulletin on Thursday, the government-owned ITN television channel announced that half the work force turned up for work on Wednesday and 80 percent on Thursday. The WSWs received reports that several thousand workers in remote tea estates, such as in the Bogawantalawa area, were not at work on Thursday.

Below are comments from plantation workers and their supporters to the WSWs.

Several hundred Peradeniya university students staged a two hour demonstration on December 14 in support of the striking workers. Their slogans included: "Pay the 300-rupee wage", "The trade unions are dead", "Don't betray the workers struggle" and "Workers are not slaves".

Up Country Student Union (UCSU) secretary **R. Chandramohan** told the WSWs: "This is the first campaign by students in support of workers in recent times. We have no faith in the trade unions. The CWC is already working to sabotage the wage struggle. They have campaigned house-to-house urging workers to return to work. We are already discussing how to get all the students involved in this struggle."

Sunil Tennakoon, a Sinhala worker from Kegalle, was among hundreds who attended last Sunday's meeting organised by the UPF for deputy labour minister Mervin Silva.

"I came here representing workers from our area to hear what the deputy minister of labour had to say. Neither the minister nor the trade union leaders have told us concretely what they are going to do about our wage demand. We are asking for a wage rise to cope with the rising cost of living, but the deputy minister is talking about sending us overseas to earn more. It is like showing honeycomb to an amputated man [without hands]. Before leaving, my co-workers told me not to accept anything less than our demand.

"We are in this struggle without any religious or racial differences. But I heard that some thugs and ministerial bodyguards are trying to create communal divisions by assaulting Tamil-speaking workers and sabotaging our just struggle. [He was referring to an incident at the Lavent estate at Yatiyantota where ministerial employees attacked workers.]

"For the past 20 years, whatever government was in power, it carried out a war against our Tamil fellow citizens of this country and spent a very large amount of money for no-one's benefit. This money could have been used to improve welfare facilities for all the people. I agree with your point that the workers of this country and around the world should unite to change the system."

Devadas, from the Welioya estate, also attended the Hatton meeting. "I heard them saying that the companies are complaining about losses. If that is the case, we should ask the companies to leave the estates. We can run them.

"If we fight for our rights, we are branded as supporters of terrorists. I was arrested previously and detained for over a year. Even now they might try to arrest me because I am leading the strike in our area. That is the situation.

“If the government can spend millions and millions of rupees to wage a war that benefits neither Sinhalese nor any others, why can’t it think about our plight and spend the money for the benefit of people?”

“Using the war [as a pretext], the government has passed anti-terrorist laws, which are used against the workers. Now the JVP is in favour of the PTA [Prevention of Terrorism Act] which was re-imposed recently. This party has forgotten that the same law was used against them [in 1987-1990].”

Estate workers from the Bogawantalawa area did not return to work on Wednesday or Thursday. Hundreds of workers from the Tientsen estate tried to march into town on Wednesday to protest against the agreement, but were blocked by police. Workers who spoke to the WWSWS on Thursday were deeply hostile to the trade unions and declared that they were not going to pay their unions dues any more.

Sathasivam from the Tientsen estate said: “The trade unions have cheated us. We oppose this collective agreement but we are helpless. No one is repairing our houses or the roads. If they make any repairs they deduct the expense from our wages. Prices for basic items have reached intolerable levels.

“They [the unions] didn’t ask us about our wage. They decide something with the companies and impose it on us. What is the meaning of being a member of these trade unions? They think workers will bow to them like in the past. Now the situation has changed. We should not allow them the cheat us again.”

A young worker from the Tientsen estate said: “We got a pay increase of just 35 rupees. A kilo of sugar is now 62 rupees. I have been a member of the CWC for a long time. We pay them 45 rupees each month. But they didn’t fight for us.

“They have signed the agreement for two years. Today a kilo of flour is 42 rupees. What will it be in two years time? Our people took part in this strike under difficult conditions, selling a few bottles of milk and cow dung or doing casual work to make ends meet. But these politicians never think about that. They are just interested in their profits and privileges.

A group of workers from the **Dunbar estate** were extremely angry at the unions’ sell-out. One of the workers explained: “They have only increased our basic salary by 35 rupees, which is not enough for a kilo of rice or two coconuts. Apart from that, by reaching this collective agreement, the trade unions have mortgaged us for two years. Can you imagine what the cost of living will be in the coming two years? [UPF leader] Chandrasekaran says this is a victory for the workers. It is a lie. They told us that they would settle the problem by talking to the president. But the president has favoured the companies, not us.

“We have been striking more than two weeks, holding demonstrations, pickets and sit-in strikes, but we have not won our demands. We voted for the [opposition] UNP and [Rajapakse’s] SLFP as these trade union leaders asked us. From now on we will not vote for any of these parties. As you say, the Rajapakse government has again started the war and we have to bear the burden. We agree with your demand that Sri Lankan forces should withdraw from the north and east.”

Suratalee, a worker from the Thalawakele Coombwood estate and a mother of four, explained: “I have been working here for 13 years from the age of 15. My mother has been working for about 35 years. But we have no prospect of a better life. I do not have a house, despite asking management so many times. Presently I live in a small hut made of mud adjoining my mother’s house. The roof is collapsing. On rainy days, water comes through the holes in the roof and we go into my mother’s house.

“I complained about this to the CWC union but they told me to speak to the manager. They don’t care about our lives. What they want is our membership dues. My nine-year-old daughter cannot do her homework as there are no facilities in our house. Next year, I will have to send my five-year-old daughter to school. I did not have the 2,000 rupees needed to

send her to the nursery.

“We cannot live on our income. I need at least four packets of milk powder for my baby. One packet is 210 rupees. We cannot always eat. For lunch we make rotis [bread] from one kilo of flour. After giving them to the children, I sometimes go to work in the afternoon without eating. My husband sends small amounts of money from the odd jobs he gets in Colombo.”

Banda, a Sinhala worker from an estate near Bandarawela, is an estate guard. Usually the guards do not strike, but Banda explained that all 100 Sinhala workers at his estate had joined the strike.

“Our day’s wage is a shameful one,” he said. “We have no faith in this government. I have three educated sons, but they don’t have jobs. Prices for all the essentials are skyrocketing. This war is a crime. People are getting killed on both sides. The JVP is campaigning for war and supporting the government. A few years back, they also waged a war against the people.”

Rajendran and other workers at the Dambetenna estate near Bandarawela did not return to work on Wednesday as a protest against the unions’ betrayal. He said workers thought they would be better off under *Mahinda Chinthanaya*, Rajapakse’s program for the November 2005 presidential election]. But a 450-gram loaf of bread was now more than 20 rupees, he said. The prices of other basics had also gone up, and workers had no faith in the government or the union leaders.

Bala, from the Nayabedde estate near Bandarawela, said: “We are only returning to work unwillingly. We will not allow the trade union leaders to come here. We are planning to ask a TV channel to come this weekend so we can explain our plight and announce that we are resigning from the trade unions. They collect 60 rupees a month from us.

“The tin sheets on the roof of our line rooms are corroded. We don’t have proper water and electricity supplies. Some lines [barracks] have no electricity. There are no proper steps or paths. The government is doing nothing, plantation companies are doing nothing.

“During bad weather, we may finish our work at 2 p.m. but we have to wait for another one or one and a half hours until they collect the day’s tea leaf pickings.

“Our children are suffering from malnutrition. We have no facilities to send our children to school. The school here has 13 teachers, but of those 8 are voluntary teachers. Voluntary teachers only get an allowance from the fees of 30 rupees a month for every child.”



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