

Striking plantation workers speak to the WSWs

Our correspondents
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Reporting teams for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of plantation workers currently on strike for a pay rise.

In the Hatton area, the vast majority of workers are Tamils whose forebears were brought from southern India by British planters in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as indentured labour. Much remains of the oppressive living conditions and work systems put in place under British colonial rule.

The Tamil-speaking workers are not only poorly paid and lack basic amenities, but suffer systematic discrimination under a state apparatus guided by the ideology of Sinhala supremacism. Among the most oppressed are the women workers who labour long hours picking tea leaves and then have to contend with looking after a family in often rundown, crowded accommodation that lacks running water and electricity.

Saraswathi, a female worker from the Panmure estate, explained: “Our current salary is not enough even for food. How can we provide for the needs of our children, their studies and other things? If I work 25 days a month, I can earn about 3,500 rupees (\$US35).

“Prices are increasing daily. My children are studying. Although one has finished his O-level we can’t afford any higher studies. Our lives depend on loans. We pawn our jewelry and other household goods for food. Sometimes we borrow money from local money lenders on 2 percent interest a day. The unions were not interested in organising this struggle. But workers themselves took action.”

She explained her daily routine. “I get up at 5 in the morning, prepare meals and look after the children. At 7.30 I leave home and walk to my workplace by about 8. I come back home to prepare the lunch and again we have to report back at 2 pm. Then we work until 5. Depending on the distance, it can be 6 pm when I get

home. Then I have to prepare dinner. We have very little time to rest.”

“We don’t have running water and have to walk a long way to collect it. There are no health facilities [on the estate]. The nearest hospital is 5 kilometres away. In serious cases, such as childbirth, we have to go to the Navalapitiya hospital, 20 km from our estate. We have to pay the transport costs of 700 or 800 rupees. The estate management doesn’t help us.

On our estate, many people have no proper housing and are living in temporary huts under terrible conditions. A lot of young people have no permanent job and work on a casual basis. They have to work for three to four years to get permanency”.

When asked about the country’s civil war, Saraswathi replied: “We don’t like this war. We want peace. Because of the war our children can’t go to Colombo or elsewhere to look for work. Police arrest young Tamil in Colombo. Many young people in the plantations have finished their education but have no jobs here. They have to go to Colombo to find work.”

M. Kanagaratnam from the Osbone Group of estates said: “Trade unions decide our salary through collective agreements [with management] without consulting us. That situation must be changed. We are the only ones who know about our problems. Management and the trade unions have no idea. We must decide our salaries. The government spends billions of rupees on the war. They are not ready to increase our salaries, but they doubled the salaries of MPs and ministers recently. They have luxury vehicles, but we are starving.”

Yogarane, from Dickoya, told the WSWs: “Union leaders visit our houses only at election times to ask us to vote them. We will see them during the next election. They are prepared to take 80-year-olds to the

polling booth to get their votes. But they are not ready to fight for 300 rupees per day for us. We are now thinking of stopping our trade union subscriptions.”

At the Islaby estates near Bandarawela, a group of workers told the WSWs that the CWC had been actively campaigning to get workers to end the strike. Local CWC leader Visvalingam had personally knocked on doors trying to convince strikers that it was not possible for management to increase wages without a rise in tea prices. He warned that workers would lose other facilities if daily pay was increased to 300 rupees. According to the workers, they sent Visvalingam on his way with the rejoinder: “If the salary is enough for you, why don’t you go and pick the tea.”

Workers at the Kurukude estate told a similar story about the CWC: “They don’t tell us how much the tea prices have increased, but they only give us 135 rupees a day. The only medicine in the estate dispensary is Panadol. For months it has no doctor or a midwife. Patients with serious problems are taken to hospital by lorry. If we die they give 2,000 rupees for a coffin and four workers to dig the grave.”

“The facilities are getting worse day by day. Previously they at least whitewashed our line rooms [barracks], sprinkled chemicals for mosquitoes and cleaned them in a limited way. Now they do nothing. We have been cheated by the political parties in power and by the trade unions. On this occasion, [UPF leader] Chandrasekaran [has called the strike] to increase his membership. The trade unions are only interested in getting their subscription money. None of these unions do anything for us.”

They also recalled the words of Shanmugam Sundaralingam, a member of the Socialist Equality Party and plantation worker, who died in 2003. “He warned us about what would happen today. The union leaders don’t fight for workers’ rights. Workers should have their own party to fight. Now we understand the truth.”



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