

A socialist perspective for striking Sri Lankan plantation workers

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Sri Lankan workers in the tea and rubber plantations are due to begin an indefinite strike today to demand an increase in their daily wage to just 300 rupees (\$US3). The strike follows a two-week “go slow” campaign and a series of demonstrations in towns such as Nuwara Eliya, Thalawakele, Bogawanthalawa and within individual plantations.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that the campaign for a wage rise involves not simply a struggle against plantation owners and managers, but also against the government. The response of President Mahinda Rajapakse to growing protests of workers over pay, conditions and jobs has been to stir up communal divisions, escalate the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and demand that workers bear the burden.

In the fight for improved pay and conditions, workers must reject calls for “sacrifice” for the war and for business profits. Sinhalese and Tamil plantation workers have joined together to fight for their common class interests and should turn to workers in other industries confronting the same problems of deteriorating wages and conditions. A unified campaign is needed based on socialist policies.

The trade union leaders are adamantly opposed to such a perspective. The two main plantation unions—Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Up-country Peoples Front (UPF)—also function as political parties and are part of Rajapakse’s ruling coalition. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman and UPF leader Periyasamy Chandrasekharan are cabinet ministers in a government that is prosecuting a communal war and implementing IMF-dictated restructuring measures.

From the outset, the aim of the UPF and CWC has been to limit the wage campaign so as to prevent a political confrontation with the Rajapakse government.

The previous two-year wage agreement expired in June. In 2004 all plantation trade unions signed off on a deal that limited the daily wage to just 135 rupees plus a 60-rupee allowance. The allowance was tied to attendance, workload and prices, ensuring that many workers did not receive the full 195 rupees, even on the days they were able to work.

The CWC, along with the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and several smaller unions, has already sabotaged a unified strike by withdrawing from the campaign last Friday. CWC leader Thondaman told a press conference that his union has already dropped its demand to 270 rupees and indicated his willingness to compromise further in talks with employers.

CWC parliamentarian V. Puthrasingamany blunted declared that his union was more concerned about the solvency of the industry—that is with company profits—than with the deteriorating living standards of union members. He railed against the strike “sabotaging” the smooth running of the plantation sector, declaring: “We think that the sustainability of the industry is essential for the survival of the workers.”

Well aware of the resentment and anger of workers over falling living standards, the UPF, Workers Liberation Front and other trade unions are proceeding with the strike. But these unions, like the CWC, have already indicated their willingness to cut a deal with employers. UPF leader Chandrasekaran announced that union leaders would seek President Rajapakse’s help to obtain an equitable agreement.

However, Rajapakse has made clear his hostility to any pay rise. He has warned workers that they have to fulfill their “responsibilities” before speaking about “rights”. Three weeks ago, the president brought down

a budget that ruled out any significant wage rise for public sector workers. He has already activated essential services provisions that allow him to ban industrial action in private and public sectors.

The CWC and UPF are trying to dupe workers, as they have for years. The two unions have opportunistically joined one government after another, claiming this would help the country's 500,000 plantation workers. Instead, the CWC and UPF have played the key role in stifling and suppressing any independent struggle, even as pay and conditions have deteriorated and jobs have been destroyed.

Plantation workers are among the lowest paid and most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class. They live in semi-serfdom with every aspect of their lives revolving around the plantation—from the barrack-style accommodation to the provision of education and health services. The unions have collaborated with governments and employers to maintain the “sustainability” of the tea and rubber plantations by further eroding the living standards of workers.

The real wage index for agricultural workers, which was 100 in 1978 and 98 in 2003, fell to 90.2 in early 2005 and plummeted to 86.2 by December 2005. With the inflation rate sharply rising to 12 percent this year due to the war and rising fuel prices, the real wages of plantation workers have fallen even further. For plantation workers living on the brink, the erosion of their pay, along with rising levels of unemployment, has been a disaster.

The plantation companies, whose exports jumped from 67 billion rupees last year to 75 billion rupees up to October, invariably respond by saying that Sri Lankan products have to be “internationally competitive”. The government and employers warn that Sri Lankan tea has already lost its leading position in world markets to Kenya. And the unions fall into line.

Plantation workers must have their own international strategy: to turn to estate workers in China, India and Africa to initiate a joint offensive for decent pay and living standards.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to reject the bogus campaign being conducted by the CWC, UPF and other trade unions and to initiate a broad struggle for the following demands:

* Put an end to the daily wage system. Estate workers

must be guaranteed a monthly wage of at least 15,000 rupees for a 40-hour week, automatically indexed to inflation. Sick leave, pensions and additional payment for any overtime have to be included in any agreement.

* Proper accommodation, education and health care. The appalling housing of plantation workers has to be upgraded or replaced completely by new accommodation with essentials such as running water and electricity. The demand for decent living conditions must be part of a socialist program to refashion society as a whole based on the needs of the majority, rather than the profits of the wealthy few.

* Oppose the war and defend democratic rights. The Rajapakse government has deliberately stirred up communal hatreds and escalated the war as a means of dividing workers against one another. We say not another man, not another rupee for this racist war. The SEP calls for the rejection of all forms of nationalism and racism and demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all security forces from the north and east.

A unified struggle of the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—is needed to fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

We urge plantation workers to seriously consider this program and to regularly read the *World Socialist Web Site* published by the SEP and its sister parties around the world. Above all we call on working people and youth to join and build the SEP as the mass working class party needed to fight for this perspective.



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