

# Half a million Sri Lankan plantation workers continue strike for higher pay

M.Vasanthan, S.Jayanth  
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A strike by half a million Sri Lankan tea and rubber plantation employees for higher pay has entered its second week. The workers have demonstrated their determination to continue the stoppage indefinitely but the trade unions, the government and employers are desperate to find a means to shut down the campaign, which threatens to trigger similar demands by other sections of the working class.

The strike began on December 5 for an increase in the daily wage to 300 rupees, or less than \$US3. Almost all plantations in the central hills and southern districts have shut down despite the opposition of two major trade unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LEJWU). The strike was initiated by the Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) and several small unions, following a three-week go-slow campaign.

Over the past week, workers in the plantation districts have organised widespread protests with demonstrations, pickets and public meetings in many areas. Black flags have been hoisted in towns and on plantations to signify support for the strike.

Lack of any trust in the union leaders is evident. Slogans have included: “We will fight until the wage is increased to 300 rupees”; “We will stop subscription for unions”; “We don’t want collective agreements imposed upon us”; and “Increase the wage according to the cost of living.”

On December 6, about a thousand workers—men and women—from the Dickoya, Darawala, Danbar and Hatton area demonstrated at the Dickoya town. They tried to march on the offices of the Watawala Plantation but were repeatedly stopped by armed police who tried to seize the protesters’ banners. The marchers finally succeeded in reaching the office complex where they burned an effigy of CWC leader Arumugam

Thondaman.

On the same day, police stopped two groups of workers from the Osborn and Ann Field estates marching into Hatton town. Workers angrily told the WSWs: “We oppose the action of police. We are raising our wage demands in a peaceful way. But the police refused our right to march. Are we engaged in any terrorist activities?”

The next day more than 600 workers converged on Hatton. Businesses closed in the town to show their support for the march and the workers’ demands. On Sunday, thousands of workers marched in Nuwara Eliya while others took part in protests elsewhere in the central hills districts.

The actions of estate workers, who constitute one of the most oppressed of the Sri Lankan working class, have clearly shocked union leaders, as well as the government and employers. The strike is the first mass struggle by plantation workers since the 1998 campaign for higher wages.

The CWC and UPF both function as political parties as well as trade unions and are currently part of ruling coalition government. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman and UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran are both cabinet ministers. It is not surprising that no prominent trade union leaders have been involved in the protests and marches, but instead have been engaged in frantic talks to shut down the strike.

Two days of negotiations on December 7-8 between unions and employers, mediated by Labour Minister Athauda Seneviratne, failed to produce any deal. The Sri Lanka Employers Federation (SLEF) refused to budge from their offer of an increase of just 160 rupees in the basic day wage plus another 100 rupees in the variable allowance. UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran met with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse on

December 9, but received no assistance. Another round of union-employer talks on Monday also failed.

Speaking in Ratnapura on Monday, Labour Minister Seneviratne lashed out at striking workers, saying that different trade unions were making different demands. He complained that the government and company were making losses and warned that “the government [was] determined to end this strike.”

Seneviratne’s remarks indicate that the Rajapakse government will not hesitate to invoke repressive essential services regulations against workers if the strike drags on. The Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) has been reinstated as the government has escalated the war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The timing of the decision—just a day after the plantation workers went on strike—was not accidental. The PTA’s definition of “terrorism” contained in the Act is so sweeping that it could be applied to any form of political protest or industrial action.

Strikers are already subject to harassment, threats and violence from gangs of thugs. On Monday night, a mob armed with guns entered the Lavent estate at Yatiyanthota, about 60 kilometres from Colombo and attacked estate workers. Two workers were injured and had to be hospitalised. Police told the media that the mobs were employees of a government institution. Another incident took place last Friday at the Kolombagama estate at Nivithigala where a group of armed thugs entered workers’ barracks and threatened them with violence if they did not return to work. A worker was later knifed.

The strike is reaching a critical turning point. Workers are facing threats and violence while behind the scenes trade union leaders are frantically trying to reach a deal with employers to end the strike. At the same time the government is increasingly nervous that other sections of workers will begin militant campaigns for better pay and conditions. What is required is not a compromise on the already limited demand for a daily wage of 300 rupees, but an intensified campaign to address the appalling living conditions, unemployment and poverty among plantation workers.

Such a struggle will never be led by the CWC or UPF. We urge all plantation workers to read and seriously consider the policies outlined by the Socialist Equality Party in its statement entitled “A socialist perspective for striking Sri Lankan plantation workers”,

which has been widely distributed in both Sinhala and Tamil.



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