

Strike by Sri Lankan plantation workers at the crossroads

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Half a million Sri Lankan plantation workers have entered the third week of their strike for higher pay. Their determination stands in marked contrast to the efforts of the trade union leaders who are conniving with management and the government to wind up the strike as quickly as possible.

The island's tea and rubber workers, among the most downtrodden sections of the working class, stopped work on December 5 to demand a daily wage of 300 rupees (less than \$US3). Their present pay is just 135 rupees, plus a variable allowance of up to 60 rupees. The Sri Lanka Employers Federation (SLEF), representing the plantation companies, has offered a 30-rupee increase in the base rate and a 25-rupee rise in the allowance.

Anger among workers has boiled over because they have not received any pay rise since mid-2004. Like other sections of the working class, estate workers have been hit by rapidly rising prices. They are only paid for the days on which they work. Many workers do not receive the full allowance, which is dependent on attendance, production and prices.

From the outset, the trade unions have sought to contain the opposition and limit the demands. The two main plantation unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Up-country Peoples Front (UPF)—also function as political parties and are part of the ruling coalition. The loyalty of their leaders is not to their members, but to the government, which is desperate to prevent the strike from spreading.

The CWC and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) opposed the strike from the beginning but their members defied the leaderships. As a result, the critical role of containing militant workers has fallen to the UPF and several other smaller unions, which initiated the campaign for a limited wage rise.

UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran has repeatedly appealed to workers to put their faith in the intervention of President Mahinda Rajapakse. Last Friday, Rajapakse demonstrated where he stands. He convened a special cabinet meeting on the plantation strike and told Chandrasekaran to get workers to agree to the SLEF offer.

Rajapakse declared that the country could not afford the ongoing strike as the economy was already in crisis with skyrocketing inflation and falling foreign exchange reserves.

Over the past year, however, the president has plunged the country back to war and hiked up the budget by 45 percent to 139 billion rupees, or 380 million rupees a day, to pay for the bombs and shells being rained down on civilian targets. To finance the budget, the government is printing money, borrowing on the foreign money markets and demanding that the working class bear the inevitable economic burden.

Faced with a mass strike that threatens to escalate, Rajapakse is once again playing the communalist card. He warned Chandrasekaran that if the strike were not settled immediately, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) would “infiltrate the plantations”. Rajapakse is deliberately stirring up communal suspicions to divide Tamil and Sinhala plantation workers and lay the basis, if need be, for savage state repression against the strikers under the president's emergency powers.

The media predicted a swift end to the strike. On Sunday, Chandrasekaran and Workers United Front (WUF) leader S. Sathasivam organised a meeting of union branch leaders in Hatton for deputy labour minister Mervin Silva to address. Suspecting a sell-out, hundreds of workers from throughout the plantation districts turned up in Hatton to hear what the minister had to say.

In a series of fiery exchanges, angry workers and delegates repeatedly shouted down Silva as he insisted that the strikers had to be “flexible” and accept the companies' offer. Rank-and-file workers demanded to know why the companies could not afford a pay rise when managers were paid 150,000 rupees a month and other perks. Why did the government spend money on war, but have none for workers? What happened to the president's election promises in November 2005 for a better life for plantation workers?

As the meeting erupted, armed police entered the hall, but workers would not be intimidated. Silva appealed for workers not to blame Rajapakse, but was again shouted down. Faced with a rebellion, Chandrasekaran abruptly switched tack, declaring that he was not there to appeal for workers to end or continue the strike. “Workers have to decide,” he declared, still manoeuvring for a vote to end the campaign. Overwhelmingly, however, the sentiment was to continue.

Following the meeting, the CWC redoubled its efforts to split the strikers by doing a separate deal with employers. Yesterday

evening, CWC official R. Yogarajan told the media that the strike had “gone too far” and announced renewed negotiations. The CWC has already dropped its pay demand to 270 rupees and is no doubt prepared to go lower under conditions where the Colombo Tea Traders Association is wailing that 300 rupees a day will make the industry “unviable”.

A far greater political danger is the direct intervention of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), supposedly on the side of the strikers. Yesterday, all the unions involved in the strike, including the JVP’s own All Ceylon Estate Union (ACTU), met at the offices of the JVP-affiliated National Trade Union Centre (NTUC). NTUC leader and JVP MP Lal Kantha emerged from the meeting to declare that the JVP would call a general island-wide strike of its unions if the plantation workers did not receive their full pay demand.

There is undoubtedly widespread sympathy among workers for the demands in the plantation areas for higher pay and better conditions. A general strike of workers across the island would inevitably involve a political struggle against the Rajapakse government and its policies, above all against its demand that the working class sacrifice for its reactionary, communal war. The JVP, however, is the most strident advocate of the war against the LTTE and is utterly hostile to such a campaign.

The JVP’s threat of a general strike is a confidence trick aimed at throwing dust in the eyes of workers, while behind the scenes the unions cook up a scheme to sell out the strike. The JVP is already offering a lifeline to Rajapakse. In his media conference, Lal Kantha called on the president to intervene and appoint a committee to probe corruption in the plantations. There is a long history in Sri Lanka of establishing committees to probe workers’ grievances as a means of ending stoppages. The result is always the same: after the strike is over, the committee “investigates” for months, then decides that the grievances were unfounded.

Striking workers can place no faith in any of these trade union leaders. The CWC and UPF are part of the Rajapakse cabinet, which has plunged the country back to war, intensified attacks on democratic rights and implemented the IMF demands for privatisation and the slashing of social services. The only reason that the JVP is not part of the government is that it advocates all-out war on the LTTE, which would place even greater burdens for the working class. All these parties backed the re-imposition of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), under which thousands of Tamils, including plantation workers, were previously detained without trial as “LTTE suspects” and in many cases tortured.

The strike has reached a decisive turning point. If it is left in the hands of the union leaders, it will be betrayed. Rather than waiting to see what Chandrasekaran and Lal Kantha do, striking workers have to seize the initiative themselves. Instead of waiting for the union leaders to convene meetings, workers should elect strike committees on every plantation and send delegations to a central mass meeting of their own to thrash out

a strategy.

The demands of the plantation workers clearly strike a chord throughout the working class and among the rural masses. The SEP urges all workers to back their campaign and form workers’ committees to support the strikers and formulate their own demands for decent pay and conditions. Workers should be under no illusions. Such a campaign will involve a confrontation with the government and therefore must be guided by a clear political strategy.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fights for the following internationalist and socialist program:

The limited wage rise being proposed by the unions will do little to end the suffering and hardship of plantation workers. We call for an end to the daily wage system and a guaranteed monthly wage at least 15,000 rupees, along with proper overtime pay, pensions and sick leave. These must be automatically increased in line with the cost of living.

Workers need decent housing, education and health care. All plantation workers should be provided with proper accommodation, with all the basic amenities, including running water and electricity. A decent standard of living should be a right, not a privilege. Society must be reorganised on socialist lines so that the needs of the majority of ordinary working people take priority over the profit requirements of the wealthy few.

All demands for working people to “sacrifice for the nation” must be rejected. Not a cent, nor a man for this communal war. The SEP demands an end to the military occupation of the North and East, and the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all security forces.

We call for the rejection of all forms of nationalism and racism and the unity of workers—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim—to fight for the Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a broader union of socialist republics in 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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