

Sri Lankan unions betray plantation workers strike

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Just days after an angry meeting of Sri Lankan plantation workers demanded their pay campaign continue, union leaders have called off the two-week strike and accepted an offer that falls far short of their demands. All the unions—above all, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Up-country Peoples Front (UPF) and the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU)—bear responsibility for this betrayal.

The task of stitching up the deal was left to the CWC and several other unions that had opposed the stoppage by 500,000 tea and rubber workers from the outset. At a meeting on Tuesday evening presided over by President Mahinda Rajapakse, CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman and his allies met with representatives of the Sri Lanka Employers Federation (SLEF) and agreed to drop the strikers' demand for a daily wage of 300 rupees, or less than \$US3.

Under the new two-year agreement, the basic daily rate has been increased by just 35 rupees from 135 to 170 rupees. An additional daily "variable allowance" has been increased by 30 rupees to 90 rupees, but is tied to attendance and fluctuations in prices. Most tea estate workers, particularly women, do not receive the full allowance because they are unable to meet the requirement of 75 percent attendance. To drive up production, an additional payment of 9 rupees for every kilogram over the quota of 18 kilograms was included.

After it was announced, workers in Hatton denounced the agreement as a sell-out and refused to work yesterday in protest. "We will not attend work today to express our opposition to the agreement," angry workers told the *World Socialist Web Site*. In other towns in the central plantation districts, the reaction was similar. As of this morning, it is still unclear whether workers in all areas have returned to work.

Without the backing of the UPF and other unions, Thondaman could not have called off the strike. When the UPF initiated the strike on December 5, workers throughout the plantations ignored the CWC's refusal to take part. Although Thondaman struck the deal with the SLEF, UPF

leader P. Chandrasekaran had already indicated his full support in advance.

The CWC and the UPF also function as political parties and both Chandrasekaran and Thondaman are ministers in Rajapakse's administration. At a special cabinet meeting convened last Friday to discuss the strike, Rajapakse called on Chandrasekaran to end the campaign, pointing to the government's economic difficulties. The UPF leader called a meeting of union representatives in Hatton on Sunday to provide a platform for deputy labour minister Mervin Silva to persuade workers to end the strike.

The Hatton meeting, however, did not go as planned. Hundreds of workers from across the plantation districts angrily denounced the proposal to accept the SLEF offer. Silva was howled down again and again, eventually forcing Chandrasekaran to intervene and declare that it was up to the workers whether they continued the strike or not. While no vote was taken, the sentiment of those present was obvious—nothing less than 300 rupees was acceptable.

Yet Chandrasekaran left the meeting determined to end the strike. On Monday, he wrote to the CWC appealing for it to intervene because he could not cope with the situation. His letter assured the CWC leadership that he was not using the strike for political advantage as "it is heaping burdens on me."

Hinting at the need for a deal, he wrote: "If we can get something more than what has been offered [by employers] why should we not attempt to get that. If not, what do you think that the UPF and myself should do to increase the wage of workers? So I expect from you a valuable new approach."

The CWC leadership, which made the letter public at a press conference, declared that they understood what the "valuable new approach" meant. They promptly announced that the strike had "gone too far" and organised negotiations on Tuesday with the SLEF under the auspices of President Rajapakse.

Well aware that his own members would oppose the deal, UPF leader Chandrasekaran did not formally take part in the

talks. While negotiations took place, Chandrasekaran was waiting outside the conference room for his turn. He then had his own meeting with Rajapakse, emerging to declare that while he was not 100 percent satisfied, the wage increase nevertheless represented a “victory”.

The essential camouflage for these manoeuvres was provided by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which convened a meeting of striking unions at its National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) offices on Monday. NTUC leader Lal Kantha, who is also a JVP parliamentarian, emerged from the meeting to declare that the JVP would call an island-wide strike of its unions if the plantation workers did not receive their full pay demand.

No strike of the JVP’s unions was called, however, even as the CWC, with the connivance of the UPF, went into talks with employers on Tuesday. After the event, the JVP-affiliated All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU) and the Workers United Front (WUF) held a separate press conference and denounced the other trade unions for betraying the strike. But it immediately became apparent that the JVP had no intention of continuing the campaign. ACPWU president Ramalingam Chandrasekaran, another JVP parliamentarian, told the media that although the rise was not enough, it was “a victory”.

Following a brief meeting in Hatton yesterday, the ACPWU leaders announced that they had no alternative but to direct their members to return to work. As a sop to furious workers, the ACPWU declared it would file a legal case against the agreement—a move that will inevitably be defeated in the courts. No ACPWU leader made any mention of the threat made just two days before to call a general strike of all the JVP unions.

The decision to end the strike was not due to any lack of determination on the part of plantation workers. Moreover, there was widespread sympathy for the strike among other workers, who also confront rising prices and deteriorating living standards. The Rajapakse government was extremely nervous that the strike in the plantations would become a pole of attraction for other sections of the working class.

Telecom workers were on strike for five days from December 1 for higher wages. Last week, workers at several factories in the Katunayake free trade zone protested in support of better pay conditions. Electricity workers have warned of a blackout if the government proceeds with a planned restructure to prepare for privatisation. Last week, around 200 university students held a rally at the Peradeniya campus in support of the plantation workers. On Monday several hundred students at the Colombo campus did the same.

The leaders of the plantation unions have combined to call off the strike precisely because they feared a political

confrontation with the Rajapakse government. The JVP never intended to call a general strike precisely because such a movement of the working class—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—would inevitably cut across their own support for the government and its communalist war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Unlike the CWC and UPF, the JVP is not part of the Rajapakse government, but only because it is demanding all-out war against the LTTE. The main theme of the JVP-affiliated unions in the plantation workers’ strike was “Motherland first”. In other words, the working class must subordinate its independent interests and support a reactionary war that has already cost the lives of more than 65,000 people.

All along, the unions promoted the illusion that President Rajapakse would step into the dispute on the side of workers. In fact, the government was preparing to crack down on strikers if the unions failed to get them back to work. Inspector General of Police Victor Perera told the media he had instructed his subordinates to dispatch police to the plantation districts in the island’s central hills. The WSWs received a number of reports on Monday and Tuesday from workers in Hatton of increased police numbers, patrols and harassment.

The small pay rise will do little to assist plantation workers, who are a particularly oppressed layer of the working class. Real wages have been falling. Since the last collective agreement in 2004, the cost of living index has risen sharply from 3,826 to 4,998. Plantation workers work and live under a regime that has not changed since the days of British colonial rule—kept in barrack-style accommodation without access to proper health or education facilities.

SLEF representatives complained that the new agreement was the most that could be afforded, but all the tea companies are making large profits. Watawala Plantations recorded a profit of 140 million rupees for the six months to September—up from 66 million for the same period last year. Agalawatte Plantations made 90 million rupees net profit for the first nine months of the year—up from 12 million last year. Balangoda Plantations recorded 123 million rupees for the first nine months—up from 24 million. Profits for Kotagala Plantations were 222 million rupees for the first 6 months of this year—up from 17 million.



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