

Inadequate schooling in Sri Lanka's plantations

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The poor state of public education in Sri Lanka's tea and rubber plantations is one aspect of the terrible social conditions facing mainly Tamil-speaking workers—one of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

Plantation workers make up about 5 percent of the Sri Lanka's population and are concentrated in the island's central hills districts. The overwhelming majority are the descendants of Tamils brought from southern India in the latter half of the nineteenth century under British colonial rule as indentured labour for the expanding tea estates.

Most plantation workers still live in cramped quarters known as line rooms, many of which date from British colonial times. A worker's average monthly wage is about 6,000 rupees (\$US55) and is tied to production. Essential services and infrastructure on the estates—schools, roads, health care, transport—are limited. Unemployment is rampant.

The state of public education was outlined in a report by the Sahaya Foundation, a non-governmental group, in 2007: "Statistics indicate that of the school age children in the plantation sector, only 58 percent attend up to completion of primary schooling and only 7 percent of students who pass Ordinary Level (10th grade) proceed to Advanced level studies. Less than 1 percent of the students who complete their Advanced Level Exam actually make it to university (less than ten a year)."

The report continued: "Reasons for the dropout rate are a culmination of extreme poverty, lack of awareness as to the importance of education, and lack of parental motivation. Furthermore, the schools in question do not have sufficient resources to ensure attendance."

According to a 2007 World Bank assessment, the country's official literacy rate in 2003-2004 was 92.5 percent, but for the plantation sector was 81.3 percent. In the case of women, the island-wide literacy rate was 90.6 percent, but was 74.7 percent for the plantation sector.

The dropout rate for the estate sector is high—averaging 8.4 percent at grade five as compared to just 1.4 percent for the whole country. According to education ministry data, the male transition rate from primary to secondary level in the Nuwara Eliya district is far lower than other districts. Many boys are compelled to join the workforce.

Public schools throughout the country, including in Colombo, are poorly resourced—lacking qualified teachers, science laboratories, proper buildings and playgrounds. But the conditions facing students in Colombo and the plantation districts are worlds apart.

There is an acute lack of teachers in the estate areas. According to 2007 records, the student-to teacher-ratio was 1:45 as compared to 1:22 for the island as a whole. This translates into far larger class sizes, cramped conditions and overworked teachers.

During the 2005 election campaign, one of President Mahinda Rajapakse's numerous promises was to convert the Sri Pada College of Education into a fully-fledged training institution to educate plantation youth as teachers. Sri Pada is the only college of its kind in the Nuwara Eliya district.

More than three years later, no improvements have been made. Only one of the college's 20 computers has Internet access. Just seven subject streams are available. Dance and music classes are limited to Tamil culture—Bharatha (Indian) dance and Karnatic (Southern Indian) music. The college has space for just 262 students.

Students are given an allowance of 2,000 rupees a month, but 1,800 rupees is deducted for meals and the remainder for welfare. The food is poor, provoking frequent student protests.

In 2007, the Rajapakse government announced that it would recruit 3,000 young people with Ordinary Level qualifications as teachers. Government ministers Arumugam Thondaman and P. Chandrasekaran, who head the plantation-based Ceylon

Workers Congress (CWC) and Up-country Peoples Front (UPF), boasted the measure would employ young people and improve education. Two years later, however, no teacher-training program has been established for these recruits.

Schools in the plantation areas rely heavily on international aid. Under the Plantation Schools Education Development Project (PSEDP Project) launched in July 1986 by the Swedish organisation Sida, 2,052 teachers were recruited between 1986 to 1991. A later Sida review found, however, that the assisted schools were poorly maintained, “resulting in dilapidation of a number of developed schools.”

Under colonial rule, the British planters kept their workforce in semi-slave conditions rigidly controlled by high-caste supervisors known as Kanganis. Initially no schooling was provided for the sons and daughters of plantation workers.

Free education as a fundamental right was championed by the Trotskyist movement under the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) and Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). LSSP leader N.M. Perera wrote the *Case for Free Education* in 1944. Although the number of schools in plantation districts expanded from 43 in 1904 to 968 in 1948, conditions were primitive.

After independence in 1948, one of the first acts of United National Party (UNP) government was to abolish the citizenship rights of plantation workers. This blatantly discriminatory measure was aimed at weakening the working class using the divide-and-rule tactic learned from their British colonial masters.

In the 1950s and 1960s, successive governments absorbed some private schools and expanded public education. But the assumption of state responsibility for the running of estate schools took place at a snail’s pace. Tamil-speaking children of plantation workers were forced to go to nearby rural schools where instruction was in Sinhala.

The conditions in the plantations worsened dramatically after the LSSP betrayed its socialist principles and joined the bourgeois government of Madam Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. One of the only measures of that short-lived government was the signing of a pact with India to repatriate plantation workers.

The second coalition government from 1970-1977 “nationalised” the plantations. The move provided jobs for Sinhala managers but did nothing to alter the oppressive conditions facing workers. Many lost their jobs and were driven back to India under the whip of economic necessity, including outright starvation. Having taken over the estates, the government was ultimately compelled to take responsibility for

estate schooling.

From the late 1970s, education, like other essential public services, has suffered cutbacks in line with the free market agenda demanded by the IMF and World Bank on behalf of local and foreign investors. Expenditure on education as percentage of GDP rose from 2.9 percent in 1948 to roughly 4 percent between 1956 and 1973 and has since slumped back to 2.95 percent last year.

In the decade since 1997, 664 schools were closed down on the pretext of falling enrolments. Many of those small schools served the rural poor in more remote areas.

The launching of the war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983 also diverted money from social services to military spending. The Rajapakse government drastically accelerated that process when it restarted the war in 2006. In the 2009 budget, 200 billion rupees have been allocated to defence, while education received just 48 billion rupees.

The budget for schools has been cut from 5.3 billion rupees in 2008 to 4.6 billion rupees in 2009. University spending has been slashed by 829 million rupees from 2008 to 2009. With the government in negotiations with the IMF over a \$1.9 billion loan, further cutbacks to public spending are expected, with education, welfare and health among the likely casualties.

Among the worst affected will be schools serving the poorest layers of society—the working class and the rural poor, including Tamil speaking plantation workers.



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