

The political significance of the Balmoral Estate Action Committee

Wije Dias
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The courageous step taken by tea plantation workers on the Balmoral Estate in Sri Lanka in establishing their own action committee, independent of the trade unions, has broad political significance for workers throughout the island and internationally.

Their decision was born of deep anger over the latest poverty-level wage deal imposed by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) in collaboration with the government and employers, which comes on top of decades of bitter experiences with all of the unions. In an appeal to all workers, the Balmoral Estate Action Committee declared it had no faith in any of the unions, including those that claimed to oppose the agreement. It cited their role in suppressing industrial action during the last pay struggle in 2006.

With the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party, the Balmoral Estate workers are campaigning for workers on other estates to form their own action committees and to elect delegates in preparation for a conference to draw up a list of demands and a plan of action to fight for them. The action committee is well aware that it will have to wage a political fight not only against employers and the government, but above all, the trade unions, which will stop at nothing to sabotage any independent struggle by the working class.

What confronts plantation workers in Sri Lanka faces the working class around the world. Amid the greatest crisis of the capitalist system since the 1930s, governments and employers are insisting that working people bear the burden through the winding back of pay, hours and conditions and the slashing of jobs. Just as the plantation companies in Sri Lanka declare they cannot afford more than 405 rupees or \$3.50 a day for their tea leaf pluckers and labourers, so every business from the auto giants of the US, Europe and Japan to the sweatshops of China and Asia is singing a similar tune.

However, as the Balmoral Estate Action Committee declared in its appeal: “We are not responsible for the economic breakdown and should not have to pay for a crisis created by the anarchic profit system. We must join with workers everywhere in fighting for a society reconstructed on socialist lines to meet our needs, not those of the wealthy few. After all, workers are the real producers of all wealth in society.”

At the same time, the experience of plantation workers with their trade unions is shared by workers internationally. Organisations that the working class built in the past to defend their basic rights now nakedly side with employers and governments to hold down wages, block any struggle to defend jobs and boost business profits. The unions are increasingly integrated into the state apparatus and the corporate elite. In Sri Lanka, the plantation unions also function as political parties and their leaders sit in the cabinet of President Mahinda Rajapakse. In the US, the auto unions that helped ram through the restructuring of General Motors and Chrysler are now major shareholders.

The transformation of the trade unions into industrial policemen for the ruling class is the outcome of profound changes in the economic base of society over the past three decades. The ability of workers to wring even basic concessions from employers and government through the unions rested on the fact that production was rooted in the nation state. The global integration of productive processes since the late 1970s has undermined all parties, organisations and programs based on national economic regulation. Far from in any way bettering the lot of workers, the unions now function on behalf of businesses to squeeze a never-ending series of concessions from their workforces.

The cry of the plantation companies that Sri Lankan workers are not “competitive” with tea pluckers in Kenya or India is familiar to workers around the world. It might seem absurd that businesses are complaining about paying \$3.50 a

day to their impoverished labourers in Sri Lanka, but there is a relentless economic logic involved. To remain “internationally competitive” means a continual drive to slash costs and boost productivity. That is why the latest pay agreement in the Sri Lankan plantations, like so many around the world, is tied to production, prices and profits.

The situation facing the international working class today is the legacy of decades of betrayals by the trade unions. Having contained and suppressed the revolutionary upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the capitalist class went on the offensive. The dismissal of the PATCO air traffic controllers by US President Reagan in 1981 found its parallel in Sri Lanka where President J.R. Jayawardene sacked more than 100,000 public sector workers who opposed his plans to transform the island into a cheap labour platform. Like the AFL-CIO in the US, the Sri Lankan unions were instrumental in suppressing opposition and enabling Jayawardene to implement his pro-market agenda.

As in the US, the betrayal in Sri Lanka had far reaching consequences. Jayawardene pressed ahead with his offensive against the working class, privatising government services and businesses, including the plantations. Confronted with deep-seated anger and opposition, Jayawardene resorted to the stock-in-trade of Sri Lankan politicians to divide working people, communal politics, that led to murderous anti-Tamil pogroms in 1983 and a quarter century of disastrous civil war. In the plantations, disgust at the betrayals of the CWC led to a series of breakaway unions that claimed to be more militant, but, based on the same political outlook and program as the CWC, they only played a more treacherous role in selling out workers.

These processes are fundamentally global in scope. Allowing for national peculiarities, workers in any country could tell a similar story about the betrayals of their own trade unions and parties that have sown great confusion and demoralisation. The significance of the stand taken by Balmoral Estate plantation workers is that they have begun to show the way forward. They have recognised that even their most basic needs—the ability to feed themselves and their families—requires a rebellion not only against their employers and the government, but above all against the trade unions, and that their struggle must be based on an opposed political program to reorganise society on socialist lines.

Crucially, the appeal by the Balmoral Estate Action Committee is based on a clear internationalist perspective. By internationalism, we do not mean empty platitudes about

international solidarity, but rather an understanding that the national divisions must be overcome and struggles more and more organised and waged internationally against common corporate enemies. Above all, it means a political fight against all forms of nationalism, protectionism and racism that are used to pit workers against each other.

In Sri Lanka, successive governments have conducted their anti-Tamil war for more than 26 years, leaving a terrible legacy of suspicion and distrust. Far from opposing the war and the government’s communal propaganda, the trade unions have invariably shut down protests and strikes whenever criticised for undermining the war effort. In these conditions, it is highly significant that the Balmoral Estate Action Committee declared: “We make a special appeal to our Sinhala class brothers and sisters. For far too long, governments and all the established parties have driven a wedge between us with their communal politics.”

The Balmoral Estate workers are acutely conscious of the dangers and obstacles they confront. There is a long record in Sri Lanka of employer victimisation and blacklists, police provocations and repression, and the use of union thugs against rebellious workers. As they say themselves, “We cannot fight alone”. The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka calls on the working class throughout the island and internationally to support these workers, to follow their example and above all to draw the necessary political lessons and to take up the fight for the program of socialist internationalism.

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