

A socialist program for Sri Lankan plantation workers

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns plantation workers that the trade unions are preparing to impose a poverty-level wage deal in collaboration with employers and the government. We urge workers to reject the machinations of the unions and mobilise independently to defend their pay and conditions on the basis of socialist policies.

The unions involved in the negotiations—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and Joint Plantation Trade Unions Centre (JPTUC)—have already backed down from their limited initial demands. The talks affect 500,000 tea, rubber and coconut plantation workers, whose living standards have been eroded by a 55 percent hike in the cost of living since their last pay rise in early 2007.

After the previous collective agreement expired in March, the unions initially called for a daily wage of 750 rupees (\$US6.54), but quickly backed down to 500 rupees. A sixth round of talks on September 7 collapsed after the Ceylon Employers Federation (CEF) flatly rejected the union demand. Employers offered only a 30-rupee increase this year—not even the price of a loaf of bread—and another 40 rupees next year.

At a press conference on September 8, CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman indicated a further retreat to 400 rupees. “Although workers should receive a 12,500 rupee monthly wage [for 25 working days], they must at least receive 10,000 rupees,” he said. Currently, the basic daily wage is just 200 rupees plus a 70-rupee attendance allowance and a further 20-rupee allowance.

The unions have confined industrial action to a limited campaign of “non-cooperation” that began on September 2. Bans have been placed on transporting tea produce to Colombo and on work at the bungalows of the estate managers.

The CWC, LJEWU and JPTUC have ruled out any strike action, knowing that would involve a confrontation not only with the companies, but also with the government. Confronting a deepening financial crisis, President Mahinda Rajapakse has

declared an “economic war” to “build the nation” and insisted that workers have to sacrifice like soldiers.

The refusal of the unions to fight the government flows from their political affiliations. The CWC, which also functions as a political party, is part of Rajapakse’s ruling coalition. Thondaman is a cabinet minister, while other CWC bureaucrats hold positions as deputy ministers and provincial ministers.

Two of the JPTUC unions are controlled by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP), which are also partners in the Rajapakse government. The LJEWU is affiliated to the right-wing United National party (UNP), which has a long record of attacking the living standards of working people.

The unions not involved in pay talks are no different. The Up-Country Peoples Front (UPF) urged its local leaders at a meeting on September 6 to block any industrial action. UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran, who is also a cabinet minister, wrote a letter to President Rajapakse on Monday calling for him to intervene to assure a “justifiable” pay increase and to “prevent” any action by workers.

The call for Rajapakse’s involvement is a clear warning that the unions will do everything in their power to isolate and break up any struggle by plantation workers. Over the past four years, President Rajapakse has repeatedly “intervened”—not to support workers, but to suppress their demands. In late 2006, he accused striking plantation workers of undermining his government’s communal war and assisting the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). With the backing of all the unions, he shut down the strike on the basis of a nominal pay rise.

In a press conference on September 8, the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU), which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), also called on Rajapakse to intervene. Union leader K.D. Lal Kantha warned that a struggle by workers would create a “political crisis for the government” if the president failed to do so.

The ACPWU postures as a militant alternative to the other unions. However, the JVP has been a strident supporter of Rajapakse's renewed war and voted for the government's huge war budgets. Its unions have backed down and ended their campaigns on every occasion, rather than confront the government. The end of the war will not change the JVP's stance. The party has proposed its own nation-building program to revive the economy that will inevitably mean sacrificing the living conditions of working people.

The Colombo Tea Traders Association has ruled out any major wage increase, citing the low wages of workers in rival tea-producing countries. Estate companies have also pointed to falling tea and rubber prices and shrinking exports. Employers are insisting that any pay rise be tied to increased production.

In a statement last week, the Planters Association warned that "any disruptions on the estates caused by trade union action could have an adverse impact on the country's economy and security". The comments are a clear appeal for government support and the use of the security apparatus to suppress industrial action. The employer group has already informed the defence secretary and inspector general of police of the "situation" in the plantations.

Reflecting deep distrust in the unions, workers have begun to take matters into their own hands and go beyond the "non cooperation" campaign. In several plantations, a go-slow has been imposed, reducing the amount of tea leaves plucked and production in the tea factories. On some estates, workers have hoisted black flags and held protest pickets.

Workers must recognise, however, that they have to go far further. Any fight for better pay and conditions will rapidly become a political struggle against the employers and the Rajapakse government, which has already used the police and the army to intimidate workers and end industrial action. As they have previously, the unions will inevitably line up with the government and big business in sabotaging any struggle by plantation workers.

The SEP calls on plantation workers to mobilise independently of the unions and form their own action committees. A conference of delegates from the action committees should be called to decide on a set of demands to ensure decent wage and conditions and to launch a broad industrial campaign to fight for them.

Militant action, however, is not enough. In a confrontation with the employers, the government and the state apparatus, the working class needs a political program and perspective. If employers say there is no money for wages, we say open the

company books. Let us see how employers extract their profits from workers.

The working class is not responsible for the present crisis of global capitalism. If the present economic order cannot provide decent living standards for working people, then society should be completely reorganised in the interests of working people, rather than the wealthy few. For that, it is necessary to establish the political independence of the working class from all factions of the bourgeoisie and to fight for a workers' and farmers' government based on socialist policies.

Plantation workers cannot go it alone but must turn to other sections of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally who confront similar attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions. Every section of the working class in Sri Lanka has been hit by soaring inflation in recent years. Workers in the power and oil sectors are already engaged in campaigns for wage rises.

Central to any united campaign is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism. For more than 60 years, successive governments in Colombo have exploited anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class along ethnic lines. Decades of anti-Tamil discrimination led to the protracted civil war that has had a devastating impact on working people throughout the island.

To overcome these communal divisions, the working class must demand an immediate end to the military occupation of the North and East and the release of all Tamil detainees. These demands are inseparable from the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally. Estate workers should turn to their class brothers and sisters around the world in plantations in Bangladesh, Vietnam, Kenya and India who are toiling in the same intolerable conditions.

This is the program advanced by the SEP alongside our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. We urge plantation workers and youth to study our perspective and to join and build the SEP as the mass party required to lead this political struggle.



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