

Sri Lanka: Reject wage sell-out by plantation unions

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The Sri Lankan plantation workers should reject the wage deal reached between the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Ceylon Employers Federation (CFE). The new collective agreement, which is due to be signed tomorrow, is a sell-out that binds half a million tea, rubber and coconut plantation workers to poverty-level wages for another two years.

The CWC had initially called for a combined daily wage of 750 rupees (\$6.50), but quickly backed down to 500 rupees. On Saturday, the union announced that it had agreed to just 405 rupees in a telephone conversation with the employers' group. The deal comprises a basic wage of 290 rupees plus wage, an 85-rupee attendance allowance and a 30-rupee price bonus.

The agreement is in effect a substantial wage cut, as the agreed increase does not even compensate workers for the 55 percent rise in the official cost-of-living since the last agreement in March 2007. Currently the daily wage, including allowances, is just 290 rupees.

The 85-rupee attendance allowance will be fully paid only if employees work for 25 days in a month. Frequently companies do not provide 25 days of work. CFE official Lalith Obeysekere hailed the deal as a "major breakthrough", saying wages will now be tied to productivity. The employers' group initially offered only a 30-rupee increase, accusing workers of "low productivity" compared to other tea-producing countries.

In a media statement, CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman hailed the deal as a "victory", revealing that he had been aiming all along at a wage of between 360 and 400 rupees. The union immediately suspended its limited "non-cooperation" campaign that had banned the transportation of tea to Colombo and work at the bungalows of estate managers.

The government has already backed the agreement and urged all unions to ratify it. Plantation minister D.M. Jayaratne yesterday declared: "As a government we are happy having several trade unions as it weakens the working class. But we urge them to accept this 405-rupee wage because of the

[economic] crisis."

All of the plantation unions are playing the same treacherous role as they did in sabotaging a two-week strike by estate workers in December 2006. At the time, the CWC opposed any industrial action and directly collaborated with employers and the government behind the backs of workers to reach an agreement.

The CWC, which also functions as a political party, is part of the ruling coalition. CWC leader Thondaman is a minister in the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, which is insisting on "wage restraint" in both the private and public sectors. The economy has been hard hit both by the global recession and the huge costs of Rajapakse's communal war that ended with the defeat of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May.

The two other unions—the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and United Plantation Trade Union committee (JPTUC)—involved in current wage negotiations are likely to quickly fall in behind the CWC. LJEWU secretary K. Velayuthan acknowledged that his union was discussing the agreement. The union is allied to the conservative United National Party (UNP) which is well known for its open support for big business.

Three other unions—the Up Country People's Front (UPF), Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) and All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU)—are currently posturing as opponents of the CWC and its agreement. As in 2006, they are seeking to contain the widespread anger among plantation workers to the sell-out.

UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran, also a government minister, has opposed any industrial action and appealed for President Rajapakse to intervene. At a UPF rally of about 250 workers in Hatton on Sunday, he declared that the union would continue to fight for a wage of 500 rupees. Chandrasekaran made exactly the same empty promise in 2006—to fight for 500 rupees—before Rajapakse stepped in and demanded the unions shut down the

strike.

DWC leader Mano Ganeshan has taken a similar tack to the UPF. A DWC protest in the town of Bogawanthalawa on Sunday was set up by thugs organised by the CWC, who provided the pretext for the police to disperse the workers with tear gas and warning shots.

The most militant-sounding rhetoric has come from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-aligned ACPWU. Its leader Ramalingam Chandrasekar declared: “The estate workers will not tolerate the continuous betrayal carried out by these so-called leaders of the estate community. The All Ceylon Plantation Workers’ Union is prepared to rally the workers without any political or other differences to fight for their rights.”

No worker should be taken in by this declaration. In 2006, JVP union leader Lal Kantha thundered that its trade union bodies would call an all-out general strike to support the demands of plantation workers. However, as soon as the CWC and the government worked out an agreement with employers, the JVP and ACPWU caved in, saying that there was “no alternative but to end the strike”.

The perspective of the JVP and its unions is thoroughly nationalist and communalist. The party fully backed the Rajapakse’s criminal war and voted for its military budgets. When the government denounced striking plantation workers in 2006 for aiding the “terrorist LTTE”, the JVP and its unions quickly fell into line and shut down its campaign.

Now that the LTTE has been defeated, the government has declared an “economic war” to “build the nation”. Rajapakse and his ministers will be ruthless in dealing with industrial action that threatens the big business interests. The JVP, which has its own “nation-building” plans, will play the same role as it did in 2006—imposing the burdens of the “economic war” on working people.

There is widespread anger and hostility among plantation workers not only towards the CWC sell-out, but to all of the unions. Plantation workers in various parts of the central hills district told the WSWs that tens of thousands had refused yesterday to end the “non-cooperation” work bans and were discussing what to do next.

A worker from the Velioya estate in Hatton told the WSWs: “We don’t agree with this deal. We cannot manage our expenses even if we got a 500-rupee wage as [prices for] essentials are sky-rocketing. For more than 150 years, plantation workers have been faced with the same fate. We have no fixed monthly income, only a daily wage. Every union

is useless. They are cheating us. Hundred of workers in our estate are saying they will leave the unions.”

Another worker at the Nayabedda estate denounced the CWC betrayal. “In our estate there are about 2,000 workers but they are divided into five unions. Workers want to unite to struggle and are asking what to do as our leaders have abandoned us. Thondaman, Chandrasekaran, [union leader] Suresh Vadivel are all ministers. They work for the government and the companies not for workers,” he said.

Workers should reject the agreement and launch their own independent campaign for a decent wages and proper conditions. Action committees need to be formed and a conference of delegates convened to draw up a set of demands and launch a broad industrial campaign. Those demands should include an end to the daily wage system and a guaranteed monthly wage not tied to productivity, attendance and profits.

In doing so, workers have to recognise that they are engaged in a political struggle, not only against employers, but also the Rajapakse government and above all the trade unions. The central problem confronting workers in the 2006 strike was not the lack of militancy but the lack of a political program and perspective. Hundreds of thousands of workers waged a determined struggle for two weeks, but were incapable of politically fighting the government and the betrayal of their own unions.

Employers and the government blame workers for falling exports, but the working class is not responsible for the global economic crisis. If the bankrupt profit system is unable to meet the most elementary needs of working people, it should be abolished. Plantation workers need to turn to other sections of the working class and rural poor to fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government to reorganise society on the basis of a socialist program.

This is the perspective advocated by the Socialist Equality Party as of the struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam and the broader fight for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. We urge plantation workers and youth to seriously study our perspective and to join and build the SEP as the new mass party of the working class.



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