

Sri Lanka: Plantation workers oppose wage sell-out

Our correspondents
16 September 2009

Tens of thousands of plantation workers are defying the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and continuing their go-slow actions in protest at the sell-out wage deal struck by the union and employers on Saturday. The new collective agreement with the Ceylon Employers Federation (CEF), due to be signed today, will tie 500,000 tea, rubber and coconut workers to poverty-level wages for another two years.

Yesterday workers held a sit-in protest in Bogawanthalawa town against the deal. In an apparent attempt to prevent opposition spreading, CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman visited the local union office to advise regional leaders. Police tried to block marchers entering the town but workers stormed into the CWC office just after Thondaman had left. Police fired tear gas and warning shots to disperse the crowd.

In the past three days, hundreds of workers have picketed and marched in the towns of Agarapathana, Bogawanthalawa, Dickoya and Maskeliya in Hatton area to oppose the deal.

The Socialist Equality Party has been campaigning in the tea estates for workers to launch their own independent campaign based on a socialist perspective. Yesterday Political Committee member M. Thevarajah received an appreciative hearing from a meeting of more than 50 workers at the Balmoral estate in Agarapathana.

The protests have triggered a nervous response in Colombo. Plantation Minister D.M. Jayaratne called on other plantation unions to step in and curb the protests by workers. “It is a matter of serious concern that they [workers] create unruly scenes on the streets,” he warned.

An editorial in yesterday’s *Island* blamed the protests on rivalry between the various plantation unions and called on the government “to step in to prevent the estate dispute developing into a fully-fledged prestige battle which will lead to anarchy on plantations. The industry has suffered enough over the past two weeks or so and it is badly in need of a breather.”

The call for government intervention is a sharp warning. President Mahinda Rajapakse will not hesitate to use the police state apparatus built up during the country’s protracted civil war against the working class. During the 2006 strike, he denounced striking workers for undermining national security and aiding the “terrorist” Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Now, amid global economic recession, the government is declaring that wage rises cannot be afforded and workers must again sacrifice.

For plantation workers, the new agreement is intolerable. Having initially called for a combined daily wage of 750 rupees, the CWC has accepted just 405 rupees (\$US3.50)—a basic wage of 290 rupees plus bonuses based on attendance, commodity prices and productivity.

While declaring a further wage rise unaffordable, even the *Island* editorial had to acknowledge: “Estate workers living in abject poverty, no doubt, deserve a better deal”. The present total daily wage—the product of the CWC’s betrayal in 2007—is just 290 rupees. In the past two years, the official cost-of-living index has risen by 55 percent.

Two other unions—the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC)—yesterday expressed their fundamental agreement with the latest CWC wage deal. The LJEWU announced that it would seek amendments, but has not elaborated.

The LJEWU is affiliated to the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP), which initiated the privatisation of the plantations. The JPTUC includes unions led by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Communist Party. Like the CWC, both parties are part of Rajapakse’s ruling coalition.

Several unions have declared their opposition to the CWC deal and are calling for a wage of 500 rupees. Ceylon Workers Alliance (CWA) general secretary S. Sathasivam has announced a joint campaign with the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU) and the Democratic Workers

Congress (DWC). The Up Country Peoples Front (UPF) has also declared it will take part.

However, as during the 2006 strike, this “opposition” is purely tactical. Well aware of the widespread anger among plantation workers, these unions have stepped in to contain and sabotage any independent movement by workers.

On Sunday, UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran accused the CWC of “treachery” for agreeing to less than 500 rupees, and appealed to Rajapakse to intervene to settle the dispute. Like CWC leader Thondaman, Chandrasekaran is a cabinet minister and is committed to the government’s policies of making the working class bear the burden of the current economic crisis.

The ACPWU is affiliated to the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which supported Rajapakse during the 2005 presidential election and backed his re-launched communal war in mid-2006. After Rajapakse branded plantation workers as “terrorist supporters” in 2006, the JVP and ACPWU called off their limited campaign against the wage sell-out.

When SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah addressed workers at the Balmoral estate yesterday, he urged them learn the political lessons of the 2006 struggle. “First the CWC made a deal then the other unions accepted it and called off the strike. Workers must reject all these unions and form their own action committees to continue the struggle. You must unite with other sections of the working class. Unions are collaborating with the management not only here, but all over the world.”

Arguing for a socialist perspective, Thevarajah explained: “The capitalist system is in a global economic crisis and is incapable of giving workers enough pay even to provide for their food. By forming action committees, workers are taking the first step in putting the struggle into their own hands and deciding decent wages, working hours and other needs such as health and education. If the capitalist system can’t provide these legitimate demands, it must go. The working class must reorganise society from top to bottom. This can only be done through a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist policies.”

The workers who took part in the meeting are deeply opposed to the CWC sellout and have continued their go-slow campaign. After the meeting, 15 workers participated in a discussion on forming an independent action committee. They took nearly 500 copies of the SEP statement “A socialist program for Sri Lankan plantation workers” to circulate to

fellow workers.

An SEP team in the Bandarawela area spoke to workers at the Islaby estate who had ended their go-slow actions, not because they agreed with the CWC deal, but because of their distrust in the unions.

As workers explained: “We went back work because we have no faith in the unions. The wage increase is inadequate. Earlier the government told us it couldn’t reduce the price of essentials because of the war. But since the end the war [in May] we are experiencing the same thing. The unions are not ready to fight for our demands. If we continue our fight under these leaders we will get nothing. We want to fight, but we want a genuine leadership that doesn’t divide workers but unites them.”

At the Nayabedda estate near Bandarawela, workers were continuing their campaign. They bitterly denounced the unions for “collecting about 65,000 rupees a month from around 1,000 workers at the estate—65 rupees per month from each worker as union dues—but doing nothing for us”.

One of the go-slow actions has been to halt work at the manager’s residence. A worker angrily explained: “The estate manager’s monthly salary is between 80,000-100,000 rupees. About five workers are allocated for working at his bungalow. The dog at his bungalow is fed meat for its three meals a day. Then why do they refuse to increase our wages?”

Workers demanded a guaranteed monthly wage rather than the current daily wage system and pointed out that they were frequently deprived of their attendance allowance. “As we work hard, we get back pains and other illnesses. We get bitten by leeches while working. We have to go to a private clinic in the town to get medicine to speed recovery. Otherwise we would be absent from work and our attendance allowance would be cut,” a worker said.

After the discussion, the group insisted that SEP members had to return regularly to hold meetings and educate them politically.



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