

Sri Lankan plantation unions sign sell-out pay deal

Our correspondents
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The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC) signed a sell-out pay deal on Wednesday with the Ceylon Employers Federation (CEF) that binds 500,000 tea, rubber and coconut plantation workers to a poverty-level wage of 405 rupees (\$US3.50) for another two years.

Having initially demanded a daily wage of 750 rupees, the CWC rapidly backed down. CWC general secretary Muthu Sivalingam told the media that workers would benefit from the agreement but details have not been made available to union members nor have they voted on it.

Employers have praised the agreement. The wage structure comprises a 290-rupee basic wage, an 85-rupee attendance allowance and a 30-rupee productivity allowance. Tea leaf pluckers will be allocated daily targets of 16, 18 or 20 kilograms a day, depending on the estate, and will not receive the extra 30 rupees if they do not reach the quota. Similarly, the attendance allowance will be paid only to those who work 25 days in a month, even though employers often do not provide 25 days of work.

There are signs of widespread opposition and anger among workers over the deal. Tens of thousands of plantation workers have rejected the agreement and are continuing a go-slow campaign that began on September 2. The action, initially imposed by the CWC, includes bans on transporting tea to Colombo and working at the residences of managers.

At this stage, however, the campaign is limited in scope and illusions remain in the unions that are yet to sign the deal and are calling for a wage of 500 rupees. On Wednesday, day workers at the Kotagala estate near Hatton went on strike to demand 500 rupees.

Also on Wednesday, workers from all estates in the Bogawantalawa area went on a strike to protest against a police attack on a demonstration the previous day. Workers had marched into Bogawantalawa town to oppose the pay

agreement and were dispersed with tear gas and warning shots.

On Thursday, CWC, LJEWU and National Plantation Workers Congress (NPWC) officials held a meeting on the Nayabedda Estate near Bandarawela to browbeat workers into accepting the 405-rupee deal and resuming normal work. Workers told a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) team that they had overwhelmingly rejected the agreement and would continue the go-slow campaign.

In a significant initiative, about 50 representatives of workers at the Balmoral Estate near Hatton, working with the SEP, formed an independent action committee yesterday. The action committee resolved to issue an appeal to other workers to take similar initiatives throughout the plantations as well in as other industries.

The SEP has issued a statement calling on workers to make a complete break with the trade unions, not only those that have signed the agreement, but also those that are posturing as its opponents. The party urged workers to draw the lessons of the 2006 strike, during which the rival unions to the CWC played the critical role in blocking any political struggle against the government and shut down the strike.

Most of the unions that claim to oppose the current agreement held a press conference in Colombo yesterday. The participants included P. Chandrasekaran, president of the Up Country Peoples Front (UPF), S. Sathasivam, general secretary of the Ceylon Workers Alliance (CWA) and R. Thigambaram, and Mano Ganeshan, leaders of the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC). The National Union of Workers (NUW) and New Democratic Union (NDU) also took part.

It is already clear that these unions are seeking to contain the anger of workers while collaborating with the government and employers to find a way to implement the agreement. The

union leaders are making the same treacherous appeals to the government as they did in 2006. During that strike, President Mahinda Rajapakse “intervened” to denounce workers for undermining national security. At his insistence, all of the unions backed the CWC sell-out.

In the press conference yesterday, DWC leader Ganeshan demagogically condemned the latest agreement as “fraudulent”. He called upon Labour Minister Athauda Seneviratne to refrain from signing the deal as required by law. The government, however, has made clear its attitude to the agreement, by urging wage restraint amid the economic crisis and calling on all unions to back the deal.

CWA official Sathasivam declared that the union alliance had no plans to wage a campaign against the agreement. “We consulted workers. They are not ready to go for a union action before the Deepavali festival. So we will wait till the festival is over.” The Hindu festival takes place this year on October 17, giving the union alliance plenty of time for backroom discussions with government and employers to find a formula for betraying their members.

UPF president P. Chandrasekaran once again appealed for President Rajapakse to “intervene and settle the dispute”, saying “the leader of the country has the right to intervene in workers problems”. Challenged by a WSWWS reporter, Chandrasekaran had to admit that it was Rajapakse’s intervention in 2006 that had resulted in the previous sell-out wage agreement in 2007.

Asked if he would accept the 405-rupee deal if that was what Rajapakse demanded, UPF leader refused to answer, saying: “I cannot say it at the moment.” In fact, Chandrasekaran, like his CWC counterpart Arumugam Thondaman, is a minister in the Rajapakse government and supports its policies of “wage restraint”. When questioned, Chandrasekaran ruled out resigning from the cabinet.

The main union not present at the press conference was the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU), which is affiliated with the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Neither the JVP nor its union has issued a statement on the CWC agreement, but earlier declared that it would not betray the plantation workers. Currently the JVP’s National Trade Union Centre (NTUC) is distributing a leaflet calling for wage rises across the public and private sectors and threatening a “general strike” if its demands are not met.

No faith should be placed in the JVP’s militant sounding rhetoric. The JVP and its unions have repeatedly threatened strike action and caved into the government. Deeply imbued with Sinhala chauvinism, the JVP backed Rajapakse’s

communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and voted for its war budgets. When Rajapakse attacked striking plantation workers in 2006 for helping the “terrorist Tigers”, the JVP promptly ended its campaign.

Following the military’s defeat of the LTTE in May, the government launched an “economic war” to shift the burden of the deepening economic crisis onto the backs of working people. While criticising the government for waste and corruption, the JVP has no fundamental disagreements with its economic policies. It has issued its own class collaborationist plans for a “popular economy”, involving big business, professionals, workers and farmers working together, and offered to join the government on that basis.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its statement: “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.”



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