

Sri Lanka: An appeal to all workers by the Balmoral Estate Action Committee

22 September 2009

The following appeal has been issued by workers at the Balmoral tea estate in Agarapathana to workers throughout Sri Lanka's tea, rubber and coconut plantations to follow their lead in rejecting the current pay agreement and taking matters into their own hands by forming an action committee independent of all the trade unions.

The Balmoral Estate Action Committee was formed last week with the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). At its meeting on Sunday, the committee voted unanimously to adopt the appeal and to begin its distribution in Tamil and Sinhala to other plantations as well as other factories and workplaces.

As the appeal explains, the decision to form the action committee was the result of bitter experiences with all the trade unions—those that signed the agreement with employers for a poverty-level daily wage of 405 rupees (\$US3.50) as well as those that claim to oppose it. In 2006, the unions that claimed to oppose the agreement reached by the Ceylon Workers Congress were instrumental in sabotaging widespread strike action, thus enabling the government and employers to impose the deal.

The courageous stand taken by workers on the Balmoral estate has a broad significance for the working class throughout the island and internationally. The transformation of the trade unions into the industrial policemen for governments and big business has been a universal process. Under conditions of globalised production, workers everywhere are told by governments, employers and unions that they must sacrifice to be “internationally competitive”.

In Sri Lanka, the unions have not only enforced the demands of employers, but subordinated the working class to the government's communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). When plantation workers took strike action in 2006, President Mahinda Rajapakse denounced them for undermining national security and

supporting the “Tiger terrorists”. Having defeated the LTTE in May, the government is now waging an “economic war” on behalf of business to impose the burdens of the country's economic crisis onto working people.

During the Balmoral Estate Action Committee's meeting on Sunday, workers raised legitimate concerns about repression by the government and employers backed by the unions. In Sri Lanka, a massive police-state apparatus has been built up in the course of the war. The government's contempt for democratic rights is demonstrated by its indefinite detention of more than 250,000 Tamil civilians who fled the fighting in May. Already police and union thugs have attacked workers protesting in Hatton and Bogawanthalawa against the plantation agreement.

The Balmoral Estate workers cannot be left isolated. We urge workers throughout the plantations and the island to back these workers by sending messages and motions of support and following their example in establishing independent action committees to fight for their rights. The SEP pledges its full support and political assistance to this struggle.

We, the workers of the Balmoral Estate in Agarapathana, have formed our own Action Committee to fight for our rights and call on workers throughout the plantations and other sections of industry to do the same.

We have taken this step because we have no faith in any of the trade unions that have sold us out time and time again. All the plantation unions are working with the employers and the government to force us to accept another two years of poverty-level wages.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC) have gone behind our backs and

signed a deal with the employers to fix our maximum daily wage at 405 rupees for the next two years. No one consulted us about the initial wage demand of 750 rupees or about slashing it to 500 rupees or about accepting an even greater reduction.

The other unions like the Up-country Peoples Front (UPF) and the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU) claim to oppose the sell-out. But they are simply doing what they did in 2006—blocking any independent action by workers, while they continue their own closed-door talks with the government and companies.

These unions are part of the Colombo political establishment. UPF leader Chandrasekaran is a government minister and agrees with its policies of making workers pay for the present economic crisis. The ACPWU is affiliated with the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna], which helped to bring President Rajapakse to power, backed his anti-Tamil war, supported his military budgets and continues to vote for his draconian emergency powers.

Chandrasekaran calls on President Rajapakse to intervene and settle the dispute. But when Rajapakse intervened in 2006, he told the unions to accept the CWC's agreement and they dutifully accepted it, insisting they could do nothing else. They will do the same again. The government has already called on all unions to back the 405 rupees agreement. When workers protested in Bogawantalawa against the deal, the government sent in the police to fire teargas and shots over their heads.

Workers cannot put any trust in the unions, which operate as industrial policemen for the government and employers. We say workers everywhere must rely on their own independent strength. That is why we are calling for workers in other estates as well as in factories, schools, hospitals and other workplaces to form their own action committees independent of the unions. We are all finding it impossible to make ends meet.

No struggle can be waged against the attacks on jobs, wages and living conditions within the anti-democratic, repressive structure of the trade unions. We propose instead that a conference of action committee delegates be convened to thrash out our demands and map out a campaign to fight for them. We also believe that these demands should go far beyond a rise in our daily pay. We need to fight for an end to the exploitative system of daily labour and for a guaranteed monthly wage that we and our families can live on. Housing, schools, medical care and other essential needs have to be

addressed.

This struggle involves much more than just industrial action. We understand that we are in a political fight against the government, the employers and, above all, the unions. We have read and agree with the Socialist Equality Party's statement on the wages struggle. We urge other workers to study and seriously consider the issues that it raises. (See: "A socialist program for Sri Lankan plantation workers")

The statement points out that workers throughout Sri Lanka and around the world are being told that they must bear the burden of the global economic breakdown. But we are not responsible for it 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.

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. We all confront the same class issues: a never-ending assault on our living standards by government and big business. Having insisted that we sacrifice for its war, the government now demands we sacrifice to "build the nation". But this just means more sacrifice for the rich elite that owns the vast bulk of the national wealth.

We warn in advance that the Rajapakse government will not hesitate to use police-state measures against the working class. During the war, Rajapakse denounced striking dockworkers, plantation workers, teachers and university staff, as well as protesting students and farmers, as traitors to the nation. Now that it has launched its "economic war," the government will be just as ruthless against anyone who threatens its economic plans and the interests of business.

We cannot fight alone. We call on all workers to form their own action committees, to distribute our appeal and the SEP statement as widely as possible to others, to contact us and the SEP, and to elect delegates in preparation for a conference to decide the next step.



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