Photo essay

A day in the life of a Sri Lankan plantation worker

14 October 2009

The following images which provide a glimpse into the harsh conditions of life and work confronting Sri Lankan tea workers were taken by photojournalist Shantan Kumarasamy during a recent visit to the Nuwara Eliya District, about 125 kilometres from Colombo.

To view the essay, click here, then to enter the photo essay, click on the first image that appears.

Tea pluckers and associated tea industry workers were originally transported from India's Tamil Nadu in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to work in the tea plantations during British colonial rule. Immediately after independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan government stripped the Tamil plantation workers of their citizenship rights in an effort to whip up communal divisions between Tamil and Sinhala workers.

A 1964 agreement between New Delhi and Colombo resulted in tens of thousands of Tamils being forced to move from Sri Lanka to southern India. Other Tamil estate workers managed to gain citizenship over a number of years, but they are still treated as second-class citizens. They are among the lowest paid and most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

Kumarasamy's photographs were taken last month, just before the Ceylon Workers Congress and other plantation unions signed a two-year agreement with employers for a poverty-level daily wage of just 405 rupees ($US3.50), causing widespread anger among plantation workers.

Kumarasamy told the *World Socialist Web Site* that tea estate workers warmly welcomed him into their homes and work-places, urging him to expose the real conditions of life for those who produce this highly-profitable commodity for tea brokers and international food retailers.

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