

Sri Lankan plantation workers support Balmoral Workers' Action Committee

Our correspondents

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Workers at two Sri Lankan plantations have supported the Balmoral Estate Workers Action Committee and discussed taking the same step at their own estates. The workers are from the Nayabedda Estate in the central hills near Bandarawela, about 200 kilometres from Colombo, and the Divitura Estate in the southern province's Galle district.

In mid-September Balmoral Estate workers in Nuwara Eliya, with the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), established an independent action committee. The decision was made in response to decades of bitter experiences with the trade unions and last month's poverty-level wage deal imposed on them by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee—the dominant plantation unions.

There is widespread anger among plantation workers over the recent wage deal with the employers that ties workers to a 405-rupee (\$US3.50) daily wage for a two-year period and to onerous new productivity targets. Workers are also bitter about the posturing of two other unions—the Up-country Peoples Front and the All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union—which claim to oppose the new wage agreement but have blocked any unified action against it.

On September 22, the Balmoral workers issued a statement calling on all workers wanting to fight to improve their wages and living conditions to establish action committees in opposition to the trade unions, which function as instruments of the employers and the government. (See: "Sri Lanka: An appeal to all workers by the Balmoral Estate Action Committee")

Divitura Estate, Galle district

An SEP team recently met workers from Divitura Estate in Elpitiya as part of its campaign in the Galle district southern provincial election.

Workers from this estate, which grows tea and rubber, were unable to participate in a limited wage protest called by CWC prior to its deal with the employers because the union did not bother to inform the

workers. However, when the CWC wanted to impose its wage deal, the union sent a local leader to convene a meeting and present the new agreement as a "gain". Around 200 workers participated in the meeting but were given no opportunity to articulate their opposition to the new agreement or vote on the deal.

Divitura Estate workers, however, have listened attentively to SEP campaigners who distributed Sinhala- and Tamil-language leaflets on the party's election policies in the southern provincial elections as well as copies of the SEP statement "*Socialist program for Sri Lankan plantation workers*" and "*An appeal to all workers from Balmoral Estate Action Committee.*"

P, a young worker, told the SEP what he thought about the union-employer wage agreement. "We can't live with 405 rupees a day," he said. "It's our right to decide the salary we should receive but the unions don't ask us what we think. And because we will not be able to get 25 days' work and cannot reach the new high target of plucking tea leaves, we will not even get the 405-rupee daily wage."

Fed up with this and other union betrayals, Divitura workers enthusiastically discussed the Balmoral action committee statement. One worker explained: "Everything is set against us but we have no organisation to fight against this. Talavars [the local union leader] and other officials only work for their own gain. We have no faith in the unions and are in dire need of relief."

Several young Divitura employees asked the SEP team to draft a letter congratulating the Balmoral estate workers. The letter read in part: "The decision by Balmoral estate workers to form an action committee is of great significance. All working people must support them. The trade unions cannot carry out any struggle in the interests of the workers. We need a Workers Action Committee here too and are ready to participate in a meeting to form such a committee."

Explaining the difficulties, a female worker said that although she was 35 years old she had not been given a national identity card by the Sri Lankan authorities, nor had the estate management supported her appeals and issued a letter identifying her. She does not have a birth certificate, a common problem for Tamil plantation workers. Without a national identity card in Sri Lanka, anyone can be immediately arrested, even in their homes, by the security forces.

Some workers are forced to take other jobs outside the estate because they can't earn a living wage. A female worker can often earn higher pay outside the plantation.

A pregnant worker explained that she needed better meals but her family could not afford them on their current wages. “When I go to the clinic,” she said, “the doctors ask me to eat more nutritional food but they know that we can’t afford it. Most days we do not prepare anything for lunch and may have rice and curry for dinner. We also have to carry water from the well while doing washing and bathing in a small canal.”

Nayabedda Estate, Bandarawela

On September 27, six workers at the Nayabedda Estate, after discussions with the SEP, decided to campaign for the formation of an action committee. SEP representative Nanda Wickremasinghe spoke with the workers and outlined the political tasks confronting all plantation employees fighting to defend their living conditions.

“The plantation owners complain that they will not be able to function if a reasonable wage increase is granted to the workers. This is an admission that the world crisis of capitalism has pushed them to a point where the ruling class can retain their profits only by reducing the workers to penury.

“What should be defended,” he said, “is not the profits of the capitalists but the lives of the workers. This means that the working class must take control of production and organise it on a socialist basis. There is an international network profiting from tea, which highlights the necessity for workers uniting, not only on a national level but on an international basis.”

Wickremasinghe explained how the plantation unions collaborated with the police to witch-hunt workers who had protested against the CWC sell out in Bogawanthalawa on September 16. While the CWC provided a list of militant workers to the police, he said, other unions, who claimed to oppose the CWC, brought their members to the courts for the police.

Several Nayabedda workers discussed these issues. One estate employee said: “All the trade unions are stooges of the employers. We are the lowest paid workers in Sri Lanka—that is what the unions have done for us.”

V said that most estate workers would be denied the 405 rupees per day agreed by the unions. Workers will also be deprived of the productivity allowance if they do not reach the new and higher quota of tea leaves to be plucked per day. “On the other hand,” he explained, “if this target is not met the employer will cut half a days’ work bringing down the total number of days worked and depriving us of the attendance incentive.”

G told the SEP: “We must respond to the call of the Balmoral workers action committee. I particularly agree with the statement that we have a political fight in our hands against the capitalist political parties and the trade unions.”

Another worker, K, expressed indignation over the collaboration of the union leadership with the police against workers in Bogawanthalawa. Pointing to their own emaciated bodies, he explained that plantation employees could not afford minimum nutritional meals. “We can’t even have lentils. Our meals are reduced to salt and rotties [unleavened flat bread].” He said that plantation workers required a guaranteed 25,000-rupee (\$US215) monthly wage for a decent life.

In further discussion at Nayabedda, one worker complained about management moves to cut six days’ wages over a go-slow campaign for higher salaries. “Management says that they won’t pay us because we didn’t pluck enough tea during our go-slow campaign,” he said. “We’ve also learnt that the unions, especially the CWC, told the company that they did ask us to participate in a go-slow campaign.” In other words, the unions approved the six-day wage cut.

He continued: “Unions who claim to oppose the wage sellout are now saying that they are planning to take action after Deepavali [a Hindu festival on October 17] but the employers will not wait till Deepavali [to cut our wages for six-days]. We don’t want any union and have presented a letter to management requesting it not to deduct any subscription for the trade unions.”

G, a female worker, added: “The unions are not acting on our behalf and we’ve stopped our subscription to CWC. Our daily wage would drop to 300 rupees [from 405 rupees] after they [management] make several deductions.”

Nayabedda Estate workers do not have a proper water supply and have to use a narrow canal. Another female employee explained that, “after returning from work, we have to walk a long distance to bathe and wash our clothes. Previously there was enough water available in this canal but now they’ve diverted the water to the town. Politicians came here during the election campaign and promised to provide proper water facilities but we are still using a piece of banana bark to fill running water from the canal to a pot.”



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