

Sri Lanka: Plantation unions accept wage sell-out

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One week after the Hindu festival of Deepavali, all the Sri Lankan plantation unions have effectively fallen into line behind a sell-out pay deal that binds 500,000 workers to poverty-level daily wages of 405 rupees (\$US3.50) and higher productivity targets for the next two years. The betrayal is another graphic demonstration that it is impossible for workers to defend even their most basic rights without breaking from the unions, which function as the enforcers for employers and the government.

Three unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC)—signed the agreement with the Ceylon Employers Federation (CEF) on September 16. However, amid widespread anger among estate workers, several unions claimed to oppose it and demanded a daily wage of 500 rupees.

At a joint press conference on September 17, the Up-Country People's Front (UPF), Democratic Workers Congress (DWC), Ceylon Workers Alliance (CWA), National Union of Workers (NUW) and Proletarian and New Democratic Union (PNDU) promised “tougher action”, but only after Deepavali on October 17. All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU) leader Ramalingam Chandrasekar did not participate, but pledged to support the campaign by the other unions.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned at the time, the month's delay by the unions was simply a ruse to allow the anger among workers to subside. As during the 2006 wage struggle, the “opposition” unions have played the key role in containing the opposition of workers to the sell-out. No campaign has been announced. When contacted by the WSWs, union leaders offered a series of excuses—blaming each other, blaming workers or making pathetic appeals to the government to intervene.

UPF deputy leader P. Radhakrishnan told the WSWs that

the unions had sent a letter to Labor Minister Athauda Seneviratne asking him not to accept the collective agreement and were still waiting for a reply. The government, however, has already made clear that it fully backs the pay deal and has called on all unions to accept it. On September 17, Seneviratne accepted the collective agreement from employers for official gazette notification.

UPF general secretary S. Vijayakumaran claimed that the union had been proposing to meet last weekend, but was unable to do so because union leader P. Chandrasekaran was out of the country. Vijayakumaran also declared workers were to blame because they were not prepared for a major struggle. In fact, the UPF in September opposed the limited bans that workers had kept in place.

NUW leader R. Thigambaram blamed other unions for opposing a collective campaign, then declared that his union had never promised any campaign in the first place. “We did not say we were taking action after Deepavali. An agreement has already been signed. It is useless to go for an action now,” he said.

DWC leader Mano Ganeshan was just as evasive. “The DWC held a meeting in Nuwara Eliya on Sunday [October 25]. We decided to take some action against the collective agreement. We will meet the other unions and decide what type of action we will take.” Pressed about what his union was proposing, Ganeshan cut the conversation off, saying: “Now I am busy with national politics.”

CWA deputy leader Kanapathy Kanagaraj proposed another futile appeal to employers and the government. “We will start a petition campaign from November 1. It will be addressed to the employers federation and labour minister. We demand a revision of the collective agreement to base it on 405 rupees basic salary and a cost of living allowance to be given according to the increase of the index from the last agreement.”

Pleading with the labour minister and employers is completely pointless. What is needed is a political struggle against the employers federation and the government on the basis of a socialist program that puts the basic social needs of the working class ahead of the private profits of the plantation companies. Such a fight is bitterly opposed by all the unions, which are staunch defenders of capitalism.

Most of the plantation unions also function as political parties. The CWC and the rival UPF are both part of the ruling coalition. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman and UPF leader Chandrasekaran are members of President Mahinda Rajapakse's cabinet and have supported the government's regressive economic policies.

The leaders of the smaller plantation unions also have their political ambitions and a history of manoeuvring between Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP). CWC leader Ganesan, for instance, is an MP for the Western Provincial Front, which is in an alliance with the UNP.

The wretched character of these union bureaucrats is epitomised by NUW leader Thigambaram, a Colombo-based businessman, who became a UPF parliamentarian in 2004. At the time, the UPF was in an alliance with the UNP. However, just before the 2005 presidential election, Thigambaram broke ranks with the UPF and campaigned for Rajapakse.

As opposition among plantation workers grew to Rajapakse's renewed communal war and attacks on living standards, the NUW did another about face. Prior to this year's provincial council elections, Thigambaram broke with the government and entered an alliance with the UNP. During the recent wage talks, the NUW initially supported the UNP-affiliated LJEWU, which was directly involved, only backing away when the opposition of workers became apparent.

CWA leader Sathasivam has a similar history. He broke from the CWC in early 1990 amid a wrangle over leadership positions. In 2007-2008 he backed the government and became an adviser to Rajapakse. Prior to the 2009 provincial elections, he withdrew his support and joined with the UNP when his party was left out of the government's list of nominations.

The remaining union, the ACPWU, is affiliated with the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which

attempts to posture as a more militant alternative to the others. The JVP is part of the parliamentary opposition, but in 2005 it campaigned vigorously for Rajapakse and has fully backed his communal war.

Currently, in a bid to boost its flagging support, the JVP is organising limited protests and stoppages of power, oil and railway workers, whose wages have been frozen by the government. Its role among the plantation workers is a sharp warning for other workers as to what to expect.

Having kept its distance from the other unions, the ACPWU now uses their inaction as an excuse for its own. ACPWU secretary A. D. Premaratna told the WSW: "Now the agreement has been signed. Workers stopped the protest. If we take any future action we have to prepare it. If other unions initiate any actions we will support."

Workers must draw the appropriate political conclusions. Within the framework of the trade unions, it is impossible to defend even the most basic right of workers for an adequate wage to feed and clothe themselves and their families. The plantation unions function as industrial policemen for employers and the government in a never-ending race to make Sri Lankan tea, rubber and copra competitive with its rivals.

The way out of this blind alley was shown by workers at the Balmoral Estate in Agarapathana who formed their own action committee independent of the trade unions and, with the SEP's political assistance, issued an appeal for workers in other plantations and workplaces to do the same. Central to that appeal was the necessity of a unified political struggle of workers for a workers' and farmers' government to implement a socialist program.

The SEP urges all workers to seriously study this appeal, circulate it as widely as possible, form their own action committee and link up with the SEP and workers at the Balmoral Estate.



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