

“Rajapakse’s era not golden for us”—Sri Lankan plantation workers

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“President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government say they have produced a golden era for the plantations. Yes, it’s a golden era for bosses of the plantation companies. But not for the workers,” a Norwood Estate tea plantation worker told the WSW.

A WSW reporting team visited the Norwood Estate, near Hatton in Sri Lanka’s central plantation district of Nuwara Eliya, as part of the Socialist Equality Party’s campaign for the April 8 parliamentary elections. SEP candidates are contesting the Jaffna, Nuwara-Eliya, Colombo and Galle districts.

Our reporters found deep hostility toward the Rajapakse regime and the vicious war that it resumed in 2006 against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), as well as widespread disgust with all the parties and trade unions that have dominated Sri Lankan politics for decades.

The general election is taking place in an environment of government intimidation and repression against opposition parties and the working class. Political tensions are increasing in the Nuwara-Eliya district, with clashes between rival parties. In particular, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) has unleashed attacks on its political opponents. The CWC, which is both a trade union and a political party, is a member of Rajapakse’s ruling coalition. Facing open discontent among workers, particularly over its sellout wage deal last September, the CWC is desperately trying to boost its vote.

The Norwood Estate worker commented: “In the past year, the union leaders, particularly [CWC leader Arumugam] Thondaman, betrayed our wages struggle. The unions are not fighting for workers; they are fighting for the plantation managements. They explain the difficulties of the managements to us, not our

difficulties to the managements. If we go against the unions, particularly the CWC, it acts against us like a police force.”

Since Rajapakse took office in 2005, the daily wage of a plantation worker has increased only from 200 to 285 rupees (\$US1.80 to \$US2.50), while the cost of living has skyrocketed. The government falsely claims that there has been massive development in the plantation areas. However, most of the workers in Norwood live in old barrack-style rooms that lack basic amenities.

A female worker told us: “I am not going to work today because I have to fill the water for our use this week. Since we don’t have a house, we are living in a small temporary hut with two children.”

She is a member of Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, which is affiliated to the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP). The Nuwara-Eliya district UNP leader, K. K. Piyadasa, was due to visit the estate and workers were preparing to lobby him and protest over his broken promises as a member of provincial council.

Ramaih, an unemployed young worker, explained: “In our estate nearly 60 youth are unemployed while 25 work casually in the estate.” According to Ramaih, the estate management hires retired workers as cheap casual labour and refuses employment to young people. “We organised several protest activities during the past month demanding jobs. But the management has refused, and trade unions are not fighting for the unemployed youth or for workers’ rights,” he added.

At another estate, Annfield, a worker, Anandan, pointed to the broken promises of a previous UNP government—that of President Ranasinghe Premadasa in the 1990s: “President Premadasa’s government declared there would be ‘shelter for all’ by the year

2000. The CWC leaders were ministers in his government too. But we still have no new shelters.”

Anandan continued: “Over the years, all these plantation trade union leaders have been in coalitions with the ruling parties and received ministerial portfolios but there hasn’t been any remarkable development in the plantation areas. These leaders claim they join the governments for the benefit of workers. They have benefited, but not us.”

A fellow Annfield worker, Murugan, 45, said: “The government used millions of rupees for a war [in the north and east] that killed so many people. When we asked for a small wage increase to survive, we were branded as supporters of terrorism. But all our unions supported the government and betrayed our struggles. Now the UNP promises to pay us high salaries when they come to power. But its union also signed the wage agreement that sold out our demands.”

Murugan added: “We thought that [National Union of Workers leader R.] Thigambaram would do something for us. He showed a radical face when we were denied a decent wage rise. But he is no different. He is also contesting the elections on the UNP list, together with those who betrayed us.”

Letchumy, a female worker from the Balmoral estate of Agrapatana, said workers would not vote for anybody in the April 8 elections: “We will tear the polling cards. All the trade unions and the parties have betrayed us.”

Seethalakshmi, a female worker and mother of three from the Panmure Estate in Hatton, told us: “It is very hard to live with our low income. For each of our three children we have to spend around 1,000 rupees per month on tuition fees.”

Seethalakshmi and her family live in a house built with clay, which has no proper water supply or sanitation. They have to travel three kilometres to visit the nearest hospital in Dickoya. For a serious illness they must go to the Nawalapitiya hospital, about 25 km away. There is no ambulance in the estate. Workers must hire a vehicle from Hatton town, even when a pregnant mother begins her labour.

“We are in the [trade] union just for the sake of it,” Seethalakshmi commented. “They only come at election time and grant money to the Kovil [Hindu temple] and disappear. They do not seriously consider any of our problems.” She concluded: “No matter

which major party we vote for in this election, not one is going to solve our problems.”

G. Sivan, 60, has been working in the Panmure Estate since he was 14, along with his two brothers. They had no other option in life because their parents could not afford to pay for their education. Throughout their lives, none of the estate workers’ basic problems have been resolved by the succession of Colombo governments.

Sivan said some workers had been provided with housing loans, which they must repay in 795-rupees monthly instalments—about a quarter their wage. Even to receive full salaries, workers had to work 18 days a month and achieve the daily plucking targets. If they worked one day less, they lost around 25 percent of their monthly salary.

“Our income is not enough even to buy the basic amenities,” Sivan objected. “One kilo of rice is 55 rupees, one kilo of dhal [lentils] is 200 rupees, and a kilo of coconut oil is 250 rupees. How can we afford all this on a daily basis? The government said it could not reduce the food prices due to the war [against the LTTE]. Nearly one year has passed since the end of the war but the prices are still rising.”

Sivan was equally bitter about the unions: “The unions are selfishly aligned with the companies and the government. They are not on the side of the workers. The working class needs a new leadership. I have known the Socialist Equality Party for years, and its warnings have come true.”

He concluded: “I have lived under many governments—from the time of Madam Bandaranaike [prime minister in the 1960s, 1970s and 1990s], through the UNP regime and up to the present one. None has solved our problems. We need a new party with a new program.”



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