

# Sri Lankan plantation workers must launch an independent wage struggle

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)  
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The two-year collective pay agreement imposed on Sri Lankan plantation workers in 2009 by the trade unions expired on March 31. Already another betrayal is being prepared that will keep wages at poverty levels so as to preserve company profits.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges workers to take matters into their own hands by forming action committees independent of the trade unions to organise and prosecute a campaign for decent wages and conditions. The SEP pledges every political assistance for such a struggle.

The SEP calls for an end to the daily wage system that is geared to maximise profits at the expense of workers. We call for a guaranteed monthly wage of 30,000 rupees for a 40-hour week, indexed on a quarterly basis to inflation. Estate workers must also receive fully-paid medical leave, proper pensions and additional payment for any overtime work.

The trade unions will never fight for these demands. The comments of Democratic People's Front (DPF) leader Mano Ganeshan to the *World Socialist Web Site* sum up the position of all of them: "We are demanding a basic daily wage of 500 rupees plus 250 rupees in allowances. We can't demand more than that. If we demand more, the tea industry will collapse."

In other words, the profitability of the tea industry and major corporations comes ahead of the pressing needs of workers and their families. Like their counterparts around the world, the plantation unions sacrifice the living standards of workers to assist Sri Lankan corporations to compete in the never-ending, cutthroat competition on global markets.

Ahead of negotiations, Ceylon Employers Federation (CEF) chairman Lalith Obeysekera has already made clear that "the possibility of giving a salary increase depends on productivity." Once again, employers will exploit the

"negotiations" with the unions to tie pitiful wage rises to production targets that are difficult to meet.

This is despite huge profits. A Colombo stock market report found that 23 tea and rubber companies increased their profits in 2010 by 935 percent compared to 2009—due to low wages and high commodity prices. Profits jumped from 453 million rupees in 2009 to 4,690 million rupees in 2010.

By comparison, the living standards of plantation workers have plunged. For agricultural workers, real wage index has fallen from 93 in 2004 to 83 in 2009. Taking inflation in 2010 into account, the index has dropped further, to about 78. In other words, even based on these conservative official figures, plantation workers have lost about a sixth of their pay.

If workers have any illusions that the unions will fight for their rights, they should recall what happened during the last round of wage negotiations in 2009.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) dragged out talks for six months—to the advantage of the companies—then signed an agreement behind the backs of workers. The union climbed down from an initial daily wage of 750 rupees (\$US6.50) to just 405 rupees, tied to attendance and productivity targets. The Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee (JPTUC) immediately backed the sell-out.

Tens of thousands of angry workers began a go-slow campaign. However, the remaining unions—the Up-country People's Front (UPF), National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic People's Front (DWC) and All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPW)—stepped in. These unions promised to fight the agreement, but delayed any action for a month until after the annual Deepavali festival, then called off the campaign altogether.

None of these unions was prepared to challenge President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government, which had already given its support to the agreement. Like the CWC, the UPF was and still is a partner in the ruling coalition.

The same unions were responsible for the betrayal of the previous strike movement over wages in 2006 when hundreds of thousands of workers defied CWC orders to end their industrial action. President Rajapakse directly intervened and denounced striking workers for “helping” the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Then UPF leader P. Chandrasekaran accompanied deputy labour minister Mervin Silva to the plantation districts to try to browbeat workers into returning to work. Workers defied them but Chandrasekaran supported the wage deal and sabotaged the strike.

The unions are thoroughly anti-democratic organisations in which workers have no say. Take the CWC, for example. Its so-called annual conferences, where the top positions are decided, were always stacked with supporters of the CWC bureaucracy. Delegates were limited to estate leaders as well as women and youth front officials who were selected and groomed by the CWC hierarchy.

Even the show of democracy at the annual conference has largely been halted. Over the past two decades, these conferences have become infrequent—decided at the whim of the top bureaucrats. The leadership uses intimidation, thuggery and even the police to deal with any opposition to their policies.

During the 2009 wage campaign, workers at the Agarapathana Balmoral estate division courageously formed their own action committee, independent of all of the unions, to fight for their demands. The SEP urges all workers to revive this initiative in every estate. As the Balmoral action committee urged, plantation workers should appeal to Sinhala-speaking workers in urban and rural areas to take similar action.

Any wage demands should be drawn up by the workers themselves, not the unions. For that purpose, a conference of action committee should be convened to draw up a log of claims and to map out a campaign to fight for them.

The SEP proposes the following:

\* End the daily wage system that keeps workers in poverty and semi-slavery and replace it with a guaranteed monthly

wage of 30,000 rupees for a 40-hour week.

\* Establish fully paid medical care, proper pensions and overtime payment.

\* Fight for decent housing with water, electricity and sanitation as well as proper education and health care for plantation workers and their families.

These should be basic rights for working people, not privileges handed out by the companies and their union accomplices.

Workers should be under no illusions. A campaign for such demands will mean a political fight not just against the Rajapakse government, but the entire political establishment that will inevitably side with the corporations. The allies of plantation workers are their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka and internationally who face similar problems. It is to them that estate workers must turn.

This requires a political program. Workers will only win any concessions insofar as their actions are aimed not at pressuring the government or corporate elite, but are directed at the taking of political power at the head of the rural masses. That is why the SEP fights for a workers’ and farmers’ government in the form of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism internationally. Only in that way can society be reorganised to meet the pressing needs of the majority, rather than the profits of the wealthy few. We urge all workers to take up this struggle.



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