

Sri Lankan plantation workers speak to the WSWS

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The poverty-level two-year collective agreement on wages that the trade unions imposed on Sri Lankan plantation workers in 2009 expired on March 31, and there are already signs of another union betrayal of the basic needs and rights of these long-oppressed workers.

Under the agreement, plantation workers receive a basic daily wage of just 285 rupees (\$US2.58). If they meet onerous attendance and productivity quotas, they qualify for an incentive allowance of 125 rupees, taking the total to 405 rupees (\$3.66). Most workers do not receive this allowance.

Workers' anger over the high cost of living is certain to generate another pay struggle, as it did in 2009. A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team recently visited several tea plantations in the Nuwara Eliya district to discuss the conditions facing workers and the issues raised by the Socialist Equality Party's April 1 statement "Sri Lankan plantation workers must launch an independent wage struggle").

The unions are already working to help the employers and the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse to suppress wage demands and defend company profits. According to the *Daily FT*, the latest round of talks between the Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC), government officials and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC) and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) took place on May 5.

JPTUC president S. Ramanathan told the *Daily FT* that the unions had not put forward any formal pay demand. The unions called on the companies to "take into considerations the current cost of living and then revise the basic salary" of plantation workers. In other words, the unions have left it to the EFC to decide the amount of any wage rise.

The Planters Association (PA) has already indicated its opposition to even a small increase. Responding to the completely inadequate 295-rupee pay rise demanded by the All Ceylon Estate Workers Union, a senior PA official declared: "[A] wage increase of even 100 rupees a day would mean that the industry will have to bear an additional cost of 5 billion rupees."

The reporting team distributed thousands of copies of the

Tamil version of the April 1 SEP statement, which urges workers to take matters into their own hands by forming action committees independent of the unions to organise and prosecute a campaign for decent wages and conditions.

The statement 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 SEP explained that a campaign for such demands would mean a political fight not just against the Rajapakse government, but the entire political establishment that would inevitably side with the corporations. The plantation workers would have to turn to their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka and internationally who face similar problems, on the basis of a socialist program.

The statement provoked an animated discussion among plantation workers, teachers, housewives and young people and many questions. Workers vehemently denied the government's claims that it had advanced the social and economic conditions of plantation workers. At the same time, they expressed their contempt for the pro-employer role of the trade unions.

Rasaiyah, a worker at the Glenugie Estate at Maskeliya, said the SEP statement was the first time that he had seen a demand for guaranteed monthly wages, pensions and medical leave for plantation workers. "The trade unions have never raised such demands. Since the beginning of the tea plantations in Sri Lanka, generations of plantation workers have worked for daily wages. Every government has considered us to be some kind of creatures rather than human beings. I am sure that trade unions will never raise these demands. They will be hostile."

Referring to the Democratic People's Front (DPF) leader Mano Ganesan, who has called for a daily wage of 500 rupees and a 250 rupee-allowance, Rasaiyah said: "We need at least 1,000 rupees per day for a decent life. According to him, if we demand more, the tea industry will collapse."

Commenting on the tenfold rise in plantation company profits to 4,690 million rupees in 2010, Rasaiyah said: "Actually, we didn't know that these companies are profiting this much. We only learnt it after reading the SEP statement. According to the

company owners and the union leaders, any small pay hike could hit the industry hard. As they profit this much, how can it be? This is a big lie.”

According to the Central Bank report for 2010, the Real Wage Rate Index for agricultural workers rose from 83.0 in 2009 to 110.9 in 2010. But these calculations were based on the assumption that all agricultural workers receive the full 405 rupees as the daily wage.

Rasaiyah explained: “To get 405 rupees per day we have to work 18 days per month. The majority of the workers cannot fulfil this target due to numbers of reasons—mainly their bad health conditions. If we can’t complete the target, we get only 285 rupees per day.

“Frequently we eat roti [a meal made of wheat flour] with a single curry. We can’t provide a balanced meal for our children. Even though we need 600 rupees for a minimum reasonable meal alone, our maximum daily wage is just 405 rupees. But the unions demand just a pittance. They are mainly responsible for the high malnutrition percentage of our children.”

Lechchumi, a female worker from the same estate, explained: “We live on just two meals a day. As plantation workers we rarely eat fish and meat because of our poverty. During the past two years we had to reduce that to once a month, only on pay day. The government says that our living conditions improved due to the salary increase in the 2009 agreement. What we are experiencing is completely different from the government’s claims.”

Lechchumi pointed to the sky rocketing cost of living. “Earlier we used to buy clothes twice a year. During the past two years we had to reduce that to once a year. As a social ethic, we visit our close relatives living in other plantations. We have reduced those visits. At the same time we had to abandon the annual colour washing of our dwellings. That is how they have developed our conditions!”

L. Thulsidasam, another female worker at Glenugie, added: “After the [civil] war ended we thought that there would be a better future. But our lives have worsened due to the continuous and rapid rising of commodity prices. The Rajapakse government recently increased the prices of essentials such as wheat flour, kerosene and milk powder. As plantation workers we are hard hit by these price rises. To offset these expenditures, the daily wage must be 1,000 rupees at least.”

A group of workers at the Balmoral Estate in Agarapathana engaged in a long discussion with the WSWs team over the lessons of the previous wage struggle in 2009. Dharmalingam said: “We don’t believe in any trade union since we have the experiences gained in the previous wage struggle. After months-long talks with the companies, Minister Arumugam Thondaman’s CWC signed an agreement for just a 405-rupee daily wage. Its initial demand was 750 rupees.”

Dharmalingam explained that the other unions, the LJEWU and the JPTUC, had backed the CWC, which was a partner in

the coalition government. He noted that unions affiliated to the JPTUC were controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party and the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, both of which were also in the government. The opposition United National Party-controlled LEJWU had aligned in the betrayal without hesitation.

“When we began a go-slow campaign against the above agreement,” Dharmalingam recalled, “other unions such as the Up-country Peoples Front (UPF), the National Union of Workers (NUW) and the DWC promised to fight the agreement, but finally they also abandoned us.”

During the 2009 wage campaign, Balmoral Estate workers courageously formed their own action committee, independent of all the unions, to fight for their demands. They urged other workers in other plantations and industries to take similar action.

Reviewing the experience of the action committee, Thyagarajah said: “At the formation of our action committee we didn’t know that we were taking a decisive step. Just after it was formed, all the trade unions, estate management and the police came against us. They all were against us because we took an independent initiative.”

Dharmalingam raised a question. “Yes, now we know that without independence from these trade unions and parties we can’t go forward. At the same time I know that action committees should be the new form of organisation to launch a campaign for decent wages and conditions. But, how can we fight these obstacles?”

The question led to a lengthy discussion about the need to turn to other sections of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally who face the same difficulties. SEP members explained that the appeal by the Balmoral Action Committee had resonated with other sections of workers on the island and also those in other countries who read it on the WSWs. Only by building a powerful independent movement of the working class based on the fight for socialism could victimisation and repression be countered.



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