SEP calls on Sri Lankan plantation workers to reject pay deal

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on plantation workers to reject outright the wage agreement, signed on June 6 between the trade unions and the Ceylon Employers Federation, with the government's backing, and to launch a political and industrial struggle to fight for a proper pay rise and decent working and living conditions.

The agreement condemns plantation workers to another two years of poverty-level wages. The increase in daily pay from 285 to 380 rupees ($US3.50) will not cover the soaring cost of living, with large rises in the prices of basics such as flour and kerosene. Many plantation workers will not receive the additional attendance allowance—increased from 90 to 105 rupees—or the productivity incentive. A four-member family would need at least 350 to 400 rupees for two meals a day—around three quarters of a daily wage and allowances.

Under pressure from the government, the unions rushed to sign the deal with employers behind the backs of workers. According to a *Daily FT.com* report, President Mahinda Rajapakse intervened personally to "urge the unions to come to an agreement soon." The government was deeply concerned that large protests by Free Trade Zone workers, outside the control of the unions, against a proposed pension scheme would prompt plantation workers to follow their lead.

The unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union and Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre—organised token go-slows on a handful of estates on June 6, the same day that they signed the sell-out deal. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman, who is also a cabinet minister in Rajapakse's government, claimed that workers had received "a reasonable wage increase."

All of the unions that were not signatories to the deal quickly caved in.

All Ceylon Estate Workers Union (ACEWU) Secretary A.D. Premaratna ruled out any further action, saying: "Now the agreement has been signed. According to the Industrial Disputes Act, we can't do anything." Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) leader Mano Ganeshan lamented the inadequacy of the pay rise, issued a futile appeal to the government to intervene, and did nothing further.

Up-country Peoples Front (UPF) leader P. Radhakrishnan simply declared that next time all unions should be involved in the negotiations. Likewise, National Union of Workers (NUW) leader R. Thigambaram proposed no campaign, saying: "The CWC betrayed the plantation workers. God will punish them."

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned in April that all the unions, including those nominally opposed to the CWC, would sell out the plantation workers, as they had done in 2006 and 2009. In 2006, amid a huge strike movement, the unions fell into line when President Rajapakse accused them of sabotaging the war effort against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In the immediate aftermath of the LTTE's defeat, the unions carried out a similar betrayal in 2009 after the CWC signed a deal with employers. The UPF, ACEWU and other oppositional unions claimed to support a continuation of a go-slow campaign by tens of thousands of workers, but this was only to bring it under control and to shut it down.

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No faith should be placed in any of these unions. Having backed the government's communal war, they now support its agenda of "building the nation"—that is, to implement the International Monetary Fund's agenda of pro-market restructuring and austerity. Even as international commodity prices are soaring, employers, backed by the unions, insist that workers have to sacrifice to keep Sri Lanka's tea and rubber estates "internationally competitive."

According to IMF figures, the price for a kilogram of tea jumped from 190.04 US cents in May 2007 to 327.68 in May 2011. Over the same period, the price for a pound of rubber soared from 108.60 to 232.07 cents. The Colombo stock market reported that the island's 23 tea and rubber companies increased their profits in 2010 by 935 percent compared to 2009.

Even as companies are amassing huge profits, nothing is passed on to workers. Instead Sri Lankan employees are told that they have to be competitive with workers, in Kenya for instance, where the mechanical plucking of tea leaves has been introduced. And the unions act as the enforcers for the employers and government.

Earlier this year, DWC leader Ganeshan summed up the position of the unions when he told the WSWS that a basic wage of 500 rupees plus 250 in allowances was all that could be won. "We can't demand more than that. If we demand more, the tea industry will collapse." As it turned out, the DWC and other unions accepted far less than that amount and are blocking any fight by plantation workers for decent pay and conditions.

The starting point of any genuine struggle for decent wages and conditions is a complete organisational and political break with the trade unions and the turn to a socialist program to abolish the capitalist system based on private profit. The SEP calls for the formation of action committees throughout the plantations.

Any wage demands should be decided by the workers themselves, not the unions. For that purpose, a conference of action committees should be convened to draw up a log of claims and to map out a campaign to fight for them. In its statement issued in April, the SEP proposed the following demands to address the pressing social needs confronting plantation workers:

* 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.

A campaign for these basic social rights will mean a political fight not just against the Rajapakse government, but the entire political establishment, which will inevitably side with the corporations. Plantation workers will be involved in a struggle for political power that can be achieved only with the support of all sections of workers and the rural poor for the establishment of a workers' and peasant's government.

In every country, workers are confronting a drive by employers and their governments to push down wages and eliminate basic social rights. This necessitates the unification of workers in the fight for an international socialist perspective. The universal drive in each country for a never-ending downward spiral of living standards in the name of "international competitiveness" must be answered with the demand for the abolition of capitalism and its replacement by a world socialist economy to meet the social needs of all, not the profits of the wealthy few.

That is the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and all its sections. We urge plantation workers to join and build the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, as the mass party of the working class necessary to lead the struggles now emerging.

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