

Sri Lanka: Support the struggle of plantation workers against higher workloads

**The Socialist Equality Party
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Workers at the Welioya and Bogawantalawa estates in Sri Lanka's central plantation district should reject the attempt by the trade unions to betray their struggle against increased productivity targets. All plantation workers must support this struggle against conditions that will otherwise be imposed by management throughout the estates.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers to form rank-and-file action committees, independent of the trade unions, in order to take the initiative to fight for a decent monthly wage and against the demand for higher production.

Since December, Welioya workers have refused to accept the increase in the tea-plucking target from 17 to 20 kilograms a day. For months, Bogawantalawa workers have been resisting a similar increase in their target by 2 kilos a day. The companies provocatively prepared the monthly wages for January based on the new targets, presenting workers with a de facto wage cut.

On January 10, 1,200 workers at Welioya estate owned by Watawala Plantation Company and 4,000 workers from five Bogawantalawa Plantations estates refused to accept the revised wages. At the five Bogawantalawa estates—Kotiyagala, Bogawana, Bredwell, Bogawantalawa and Tintseen—workers went on strike.

Fearful of the protest spreading, the unions have intervened to force workers to accept the new targets. From the outset, the main estate union, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), opposed the demands of workers and supported the companies. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman is a government cabinet minister and himself a plantation owner.

The other unions have feigned sympathy for the workers. On January 13, the leaders of the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU), Ceylon Workers Alliance (CWA) and Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) held a discussion with Bogawantalawa Plantations and Labour Minister Gamini Lokuge.

The unions pushed for the meeting to show that they were

doing their best to get wages paid before a Hindu religious holiday on January 15. The company refused to budge, however. The union leaders then called on workers to accept the reduced wage as an advance and to return to work with a promise from the minister to resolve the issue in the new future.

Two other estate unions—the Up-Country People's Front (UPF) and National Union of Workers (NUW)—supported the arrangement.

The same unions persuaded reluctant Welioya workers to return to work and accept the reduced wages. The unions claimed that the assistant commissioner of labour (ACL) at Hatton had promised to address the wage reduction later. Further talks were set for January 23.

As the unions are well aware, the promises by Labour Minister Lokuge and the labour official in Hatton are completely worthless. Having duped workers into returning to work, with the crucial assistance of the unions, the government will shelve the pledges. In effect, the unions have helped the companies to impose their increased targets.

The unions have been working from the outset to scuttle any resistance. Welioya workers went on a strike for one week from December 14 to protest against the new work targets. CWC members defied their union leaders and joined the strike.

UPF leader P. Radhakrishnan and cabinet minister, Mahindananda Aluthgamage, visited the estate and lyingly told the strikers that the company had agreed not to increase the productivity targets. Workers returned to work but refused to adhere to the new targets.

At the Welioya estate, the Watawala company then sought to intimidate workers. On complaints lodged by management, the police twice summoned four union branch leaders to answer allegations that they had prevented workers from attending work.

Desperate to end the protest, the LJEWU, NUW and the UPF

met with the company on December 23 and agreed to a “compromise”—to increase the target by 2 rather than 3 kilograms. The workers, however, rejected the proposal.

The unions had signed a collective agreement backed by President Mahinda Rajapakse last March that involved boosting production in return for small wage rises. The document stated unambiguously: “[T]he Unions undertake to support the improvement of productivity at estate level by discussions between the Superintendents and the Union Action Committee.” Workers had no say in the agreement.

The imposition of higher workloads is not isolated to two estates. In order to extract greater profits and to compete with other tea-producing countries, including India, Kenya and China, companies have intensified the drive for greater productivity.

Huge profits are already being made. The Watawala company’s net profits, for instance, jumped from 75 million rupees (\$US660,000) in 2008 to 642 million rupees in 2010. CEO Dan Seevaratnam said the profits margins were “mainly due to strong productivity increases and quality improvements.”

Similarly, Bogawantalawa Plantations accrued 118 million rupees in net profit during first half of 2010-2011 financial year, up by 4 percent year-on-year.

These profits are at the expense of workers. Currently workers can earn small incentive payments if they pluck more tea leaves. By increasing the productivity targets, the companies are seeking to deprive workers of even this pitiful allowance.

Plantation workers are among the most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class. Most estate workers are descendents of bonded labourers from southern India and speak Tamil. Anti-Tamil discrimination has been a political weapon to keep them divided from the rest of the working class.

All the estate unions supported the communal war by successive governments against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in order to suppress the basic democratic rights of the Tamil minority. The war was also used as the pretext to block the struggles of the working class as a whole.

Workers must break from the trade unions and form action committees as the means to fight for their basic rights. Delegates from these action committees should meet to draw up their demands. At present, the working conditions, wage system and housing in the plantations are a form of semi-slavery. This must be changed.

The Socialist Equality Party advocates:

- * No to increased workloads; for decent working conditions, paid leave, medical care and pensions.

- * Abolish the daily wage system and establish a monthly wage system. The monthly wage should be at least 30,000 rupees and indexed against the cost of living.

- * Provide decent housing with adequate water, sanitary facilities and electricity.

These rights can be won only by reorganising the economy on a socialist basis, not for profit but to fulfil human needs. The struggle for these measures is bound up with the political fight against the Rajapakse government and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

The allies of plantation workers are other workers who are facing relentless attacks by the Rajapakse government, which is implementing the International Monetary Fund’s austerity demands. Workers must also turn to the rural poor, who are oppressed by the government and capitalist system, to rally their support for this fight.

This struggle is part of the international struggle for socialism. The SEP advocates the fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the broader struggle for a united socialist states of South Asia. We call on workers to join the SEP and build it as the mass revolutionary party needed to fight for this perspective.



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