

Sri Lankan plantation workers strike over fuel price rises

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27 February 2012

About 100,000 tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka's central hills district participated in a one-day strike on February 17 over fuel price rises imposed by the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. The increases are a part of new austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

A price rise of almost 50 percent in kerosene—from 71 to 106 rupees per litre—has impacted heavily on working class families. Many have no electricity and use kerosene for lighting and cooking. Other fuel hikes—diesel by 36.9 percent and petrol by 8.7 percent—have pushed up bus fares and the price of other essentials.

The one-day tea workers' strike was organised by the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) and limited to an appeal to the government to provide a subsidy to offset the kerosene price rise. The DWC is led by Mano Ganeshan, a bourgeois Tamil politician who also heads the Colombo-based Democratic Peoples' Front. The walkout was supported by the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU), which is controlled by right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP), and the United Workers Alliance.

The walkout was not called because these unions are concerned about the impact of the new fuel prices on plantation workers, but in order to pre-empt the eruption of wider struggles. In order to minimise participation, the unions made only one media announcement about the impending strike.

The larger tea plantation unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Upcountry Peoples' Front (UPF) and the National Union of Workers (NUW)—are political partners of the Rajapakse government and oppose any action over the price hikes. CWC leader Arumugam

Thondaman is a cabinet minister in the Rajapakse government.

These unions claim a subsidy can be obtained through direct negotiations with government. But the Rajapakse administration has already indicated that there will be no fuel subsidy. NUW leader P. Thigambaram cynically claimed: "If workers go on strike the only result will be a loss of their income." In other words, workers should accept the government's austerity measures as inevitable.

The majority of tea plantation workers—an estimated 400,000—did not participate in the February 17 strike, not because they were not prepared to fight, but because wide layers have no confidence in the unions. Many plantation workers recognise these organisations as direct agents of the companies and the government to drive up productivity and maintain poverty level wages.

Prior to the new fuel price rise tea plantation workers were involved in work bans and action over demands for increased productivity and other attacks on working conditions. Several companies have responded to these protests by cutting the wages of workers.

Tea workers at the Bogawantalawa and Maskeliya plantations in the Nuwara-Eliya district participated in the February 17 walkout along with several thousand workers at estates in Badulla and Kandy.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with striking workers at Bogawantalawa Plantation's Kotiyagala Estate. The unions did not organise any pickets or demonstrations so workers sat in their line rooms. Kotiyagala Estate workers have been involved in a bitter fight against increasing workloads since December.

A female tea worker said: “In this cold climate, we always have to heat water and meals. At the same time, we use kerosene for lamps because we face frequent power cuts. Some plantation workers have no electricity at all.

“Our average family income is less than 10,000 rupees [\$US83] but now we have to spend more on kerosene. Most workers are already shifting to fire wood for cooking because of the high price of kerosene.” She said the new burden had come as the price of wheat flour, rice, dhal and other essentials were skyrocketing.

After a discussion with WSWS reporters, one Kotiyagala Estate worker said: “All of us want to fight against this burden but we can’t rely on the trade unions. As they did in the previous struggles, the unions have already betrayed us in the ongoing struggle against the [tea plucking] target increase. We are searching for new organisations to defend our rights. Your suggestion to build action committees to fight for our rights is good.”

A Glenuie Estate worker in Maskeliya said: “I agree that workers in many countries are facing similar problems. I saw on television that Greek workers were fighting against the government. I didn’t know what has actually taken place in Egypt but I saw that thousands of people have come to street against their rulers.”

A retired female worker explained that the exploitation of tea plantation workers had increased over the last two decades. When she retired in 1996 their tea plucking rate was 4 kilos a day. This has now been increased fourfold. Pregnant women were previously given smaller plucking targets, but now there are no differences in the rate.

In Norwood, WSWS reporters spoke with St. John Delray Estate workers. The tea plantation workers only learnt about the strike on the radio. They stopped work until 9 a.m. but because they received no message from the unions decided to resume work.

Tea plantation workers endorsed the recent demonstrations by fishermen over the fuel price hike and condemned the shooting murder of Antony Warnakulasuriya during protests at Chilaw. One worker said: “Now we don’t have the democratic right to fight for our demands. As you say, the shooting of fishermen is a warning by the government. The same guns will be

directed against us.”

While tea plantation workers are seeking a way to fight the relentless attacks on their living standards, the DWC is playing a treacherous role. DWC leader Ganeshan demagogically told the *Sunday Times* that if there was no response from the government “We have planned to meet next week and continue with the strike.”

Time and again plantation workers have come into conflict with the CWC and LJEWU, which have directly worked with the tea estates management and the government to ensure wages remain below poverty levels. Ganeshan’s DWC, along with a few other unions, have criticised the CWC at times, promised to carry forward the fight for wages, but then caved in and accepted the same collective agreement.

Mano Ganeshan has also boasted that the one-day strike has the backing of UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe and Wickremabahu Karunaratna, head of the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP). When it was in government the UNP vigorously implemented IMF demands.

Ganeshan, Wickremesinghe and Karunaratna, in fact, are in a “common platform”. Notwithstanding their rhetorical flourishes against the Rajapakse government and various limited protests against the fuel prices and other IMF measures, this political alliance is working to block the struggle of workers and the rural poor against the government’s attacks and defend the capitalist system.

The authors also recommend:

A socialist program for Sri Lankan plantation workers [9 September 2009]



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