

# Sri Lankan SEP calls plantation workers' congress

**The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)**  
**27 March 2012**

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) call on workers and youth from tea, rubber and coconut plantations throughout the island to send delegates to a Plantation Workers' Congress to be held on May 20 to discuss and adopt a socialist program to defend basic democratic and social rights.

The Sri Lankan government, like its counterparts internationally, is carrying out an unprecedented assault on living standards. In line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), President Mahinda Rajapakse has devalued the rupee and slashed price subsidies for fuel, electricity and other items as well as making further inroads into spending on essential social services.

Plantation workers, who are among the lowest paid and most oppressed layers of the working class, have been hard hit. Their status as day labourers, at the beck and call of management and dependent on the pitiful accommodation and services provided on the plantations, makes them particularly vulnerable.

Workers around the world are facing similar attacks as governments seek to impose the burdens of the worsening global economic crisis on their backs. In every country, working people and youth are confronting a social counterrevolution that aims at nothing less than the destruction of all their basic democratic and social rights.

The working class has already begun to resist, leading to mass struggles last year in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, the US and other parts of the world. In Egypt this led to the ousting of the US-backed dictator Hosni Mubarak. In these initial struggles, however, the old organisations—political parties and trade unions—have, with the support of various ex-lefts, ensured that protests and strikes have not challenged capitalist rule.

The SEP and ISSE have called the congress to discuss the vital political issues that must be addressed in order for Sri Lankan workers to wage a struggle to defend their jobs, wages and living standards. For plantation workers, the crucial issue is to make a complete break with the trade unions that have sold out their struggles time and again.

Last April the plantation trade unions, at the behest of the

government, hurriedly signed a collective agreement with the plantation companies that tied workers to a no-strike clause for two years in return for an insignificant wage increase. By December, the companies arbitrarily violated the agreement by increasing the target for tea pluckers by 2kg of tea leaves a day—if pluckers failed, their pay was halved. Driving up productivity would eventually result in fewer working days per worker each month.

The government and unions condoned this illegal move by employers. However, estate workers, with those at the Kotiyagala estate in the forefront, began to protest to defend their rights. When workers at the Welioya estate joined in, the management called in units of the notorious police Special Task Force, provoking immediate strike action.

The main union, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), opposed the strike and collaborated with management and the police to intimidate workers. When the Welioya strike threatened to spread, the government sent two ministers—Mahindananda Aluthgamage and R. Rathakrishnan—to meet the workers. Rathakrishnan is leader of the Up-country Peoples Front (UPF), a plantation union that took part in the strike.

Aluthgamage and Rathakrishnan lied to the Welioya workers, saying that the company had agreed not to increase the workload, and called for an end to the strike. All the plantation unions, aligned to both the government and opposition parties, promptly fell into line and called off the industrial action.

The Welioya manager immediately met with the Assistant Commissioner of Labor and union officials. He declared that his company had never agreed to reduce the work target, which he argued was necessary to make up for losses since April. The commissioner approved the target and the unions acquiesced, asking only that they be consulted by management before it was imposed.

This betrayal only underlines the fact that workers confront a troika—government, management, and the unions—that is waging a relentless joint offensive to boost profits and productivity at their expense.

The trade unions have played the same treacherous role in past struggles over pay and conditions. 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 2009, the CWC signed a sell-out deal with employers while the UPF 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 the opposition of workers under control and to shut it down.

Another element of the onslaught on estate workers is the plan announced by Rajapakse in his November budget to break-up 37,000 hectares of plantations in order to distribute the land to small-holders—a move that will destroy jobs and evict thousands of workers and their families. The first target will be the government-owned Janawasama estates that are supposedly loss-making.

The government backed by the unions, the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party, claims that this will help workers and the rural poor, who will be able to make a profit from small patches of tea bushes. In reality, it is designed to atomise Tamil plantation workers, and pit them against the Sinhala rural poor in the scramble for land, large portions of which will be handed to private investors to build tourist hotels, private hospitals and universities.

The SEP and ISSE have called the congress in order to discuss a counter-offensive by plantation workers, and the political perspective on which it must take place.

Such a program must be based on the fight for the unity of workers throughout Sri Lanka with their class brothers and sisters in South Asia and internationally. Plantation companies, supported by the unions, justify poverty-level wages and atrocious conditions by saying that the cost of tea production in Sri Lanka must be competitive with India, China and Kenya. Workers in those countries are told the same.

The only way to oppose this relentless lowering of living standards and conditions is to unify workers around a common socialist program directed at the abolition of the profit system. To unify workers means to wage a political struggle against all forms of nationalism and chauvinism promoted by the ruling classes to divide working people.

It is necessary to fight for the political independence of the working class from every section of the bourgeoisie—the Rajapakse government and all the opposition parties as well as the CWC, UPF and other plantation unions. None of these parties opposes the IMF's pro-market agenda. The CWC and UPF are currently part of the government that is implementing the IMF's demands. The other unions are aligned with the right-wing, opposition United National Party, which in power made deep inroads into the social position of the working class.

The SEP and ISSE call for the building of Action Committees,

independent of the trade unions, to develop a program of struggle to defend basic democratic and social rights. Against the violent intervention of the police and military forces, backed by union thugs, the Action Committees must take steps to organise their own defence guards.

The SEP and ISSE proposes the following immediate demands as the basis for a political fight by plantation workers:

- \* Citizenship rights to all plantation workers!
- \* A monthly wage of Rs 30,000 indexed to the cost of living!
- \* No to increased workloads! Jobs for unemployed youth for equal pay!
- \* Decent housing, health and education facilities to all!

The full realisation of these elementary demands is impossible under the capitalist ownership of the plantations, run for private profit. The SEP and ISSE advocate the nationalisation of the plantations under the democratic control of the working class.

Plantation workers must turn to other sections of the working class and to the oppressed rural masses, whose living standards are also under assault, in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement a socialist program. Society must be refashioned from top to bottom to meet the basic social needs of working people, not the profits of a tiny wealthy elite. The SEP and ISSE fight for the establishment of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally.

The discussion of these fundamental political issues at the plantation workers' congress will be vital in developing the necessary struggle to defend the basic rights of the working class. We urge workers and youth to contact the SEP and ISSE and actively join in the campaign to build the congress.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**