

Sri Lanka: Plantation workers denounce tea estate unions

Panini Wijesiriwardane, M. Vasanthan
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Tea plantation workers from Hatton and Bandarawela in Sri Lanka's Central Hills district recently spoke to WSWS reporters about the forthcoming May 20 plantation workers' congress. The congress, which has been convened by the Socialist Equality Party in Hatton, will discuss and adopt a socialist program to defend the wages, living conditions and democratic rights of estate workers. (See: "Sri Lankan SEP to hold plantation workers' congress")

Welioya Estate, which is located eight kilometres from Hatton, was the scene of strike action by 1,200 tea plantation workers in March. The walkout was in opposition to the decision by the estate management to increase the daily tea-plucking target from 17 to 20 kg per day per worker.

Welioya Estate workers thanked the SEP for its support during the strike. One worker said: "You're the only organisation that presented a program for our struggle and even though our strike has ended you are here. You explained during the strike that all the trade unions would betray us and that they are working for management, not for us. This is a clear experience for us."

The worker said that two National Union of Workers (NUW) leaders had been rewarded by management and promoted into supervisor positions after the strike. The NUW is led by Sri Lankan parliamentarian P. Thigambaram who supports the ruling coalition of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

"You told us to break from the unions and their politics," he said, "and we are now discussing those issues."

Discussing the SEP's call for a rebellion against the unions and the formation of independent Action Committees, the Welioya Estate worker said: "I can understand your program to a certain extent but I have

some confusion about the Action Committees. What are the main differences between the unions and these committees? How do these committees deal with management? Will management formally accept these committees? We want to discuss these matters at the congress and so I'll participate with some of my friends."

Another estate worker pointed to the role played by the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), the largest plantation union and led by the Sri Lankan Minister for Livestock and Rural Community Development Arumugam Thondaman.

"I'm a member of CWC. They told us not to take part in the strike and did everything to disrupt our struggle," he said. "Despite those obstacles, every worker in this estate participated in the strike because they cannot bear the work burdens being placed on us."

He said there were no differences between the CWC and the other estate unions who claimed that they were supporting the strike. "Radhakrishnan [leader of the Upcountry Peoples' Front] came with Minister Mahindananda [Aluthgamage] and told us to end the strike. They claimed that management had agreed to reverse the tea-plucking target and that the estate manager would be transferred within a month."

The strike was called off, he continued, but none of these promises were realised. "The company, the government and the unions got together and cheated us. As you say, if we have our own movement they can't cheat us. I think one of the tasks of this congress is to form such a movement and that's why I've decided to take part."

An 82-year-old retired worker recounted some of his experiences in late 1950s and early 1960s. "I was a member of Lanka Sama Samaja Party [LSSP]. We engaged in massive struggles together with the urban

workers under the leadership of LSSP,” he said.

“In those days we believed in socialism strongly. However, in 1964 they [LSSP] entered the government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike. She signed a pact with the then Indian Prime Minister Lal Bhadur Shastri to repatriate a section of the estate workers to India, claiming that we were not citizens of this country. After that, our faith on socialism gradually decreased.”

Another SEP/ISSE campaign team visited the Aislaby Estate in Bandarawela which employs about 1,000 workers. The work load, socio-economic conditions and experiences with trade unions in this estate are remarkably similar to those at Welioya Estate. Poor housing, high youth unemployment and malnutrition are burning issues confronting Aislaby Estate employees and their families.

After Aislaby management increased the tea plucking rate to 20 kg, the estate workers visited the local CWC office in Bandarawela to meet area union leaders and demand that action be organised to fight the measure. The union did nothing.

A female worker denounced the union’s response. “They told us to be patient,” she said. “But how can we be patient with this unbearable work load?”

“I decided to fight alone against this and publicly rejected the new target. As a result I lost seven days of work. I realised that there’s no point paying membership fees for these unions because they serve the companies but I was wondering how to proceed with this fight. It’s good that you’re here,” she said.

Aislaby Estate has been an important centre in the long and principled fight waged in defence of plantation workers by the SEP and its predecessor Revolutionary Communist League.

Recalling those struggles she said: “In those days I used to read your paper *Tholilalar Pathai* (*Workers’ Path*). Ever since then you’ve explained to us the role being played by the unions and told us to break from them. But we didn’t take it seriously. Now I understand that workers cannot go forward without breaking from the unions.”

When the SEP and ISSE campaigners drew attention to the growing politicisation of workers internationally, the worker asked how the imperialist powers had been able to reassert their control in Egypt and Tunisia after the working class had overthrown the dictators in those

countries. She wanted to know about the role played by the unions in those struggles.

Another estate worker joined the discussion: “When we talk with you, we understand that every worker in this world is facing the same problems and that there should be a world program to solve these issues. When we hear other politicians, union leaders and the media, we only feel that there should be short-term local solutions. But when we fight for those solutions we get lost. I think that’s why you tell us to break from these short-term politics.”

Another estate worker asked about internationalism and the fight to develop the SEP in India: “It’s very interesting when you talk about the unity of world working class. Yes, we must unite with millions of workers in India. I’ll definitely take part in your congress to discuss these issues,” she concluded.

The authors also recommend:

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