

Reject the plantation unions' fraudulent electoral front

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Three rival plantation unions—Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Up Country Peoples Front (UPF) and the Democratic People's Front (DPF)—have formed an electoral bloc to contest the Kegalla and Ratnapura districts in the upcoming Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council election. These districts have a substantial number of Tamil-speaking tea and rubber plantation workers.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon plantation workers to reject this front. These discredited unions have come together to divert the opposition of workers to the government into the reactionary dead-end of communal politics—setting Tamil-speaking workers against their Sinhala-speaking class brothers.

These unions, which also function as political parties, are directly responsible for the declining living standards facing all workers. The CWC and UPF are both partners in the ruling coalition of President Mahinda Rajapakse and its leaders hold ministerial posts. The DPF is aligned with the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP) which is notorious for its attacks on the working class.

The CWC and UPF have decided to contest the election separately—with Rajapakse's approval—in order to try to distance themselves from the anti-working class policies of the ruling coalition. Rajapakse gave his permission knowing that he needs these unions to suppress the growing resentment among plantation workers.

The unions are making an open appeal to communalism. CWC president Muthu Sivalingam has declared that "Tamil parties must unite in this election

to elect a Tamil representative" to the Provincial Council. UPF secretary A. Lawrence echoed the same line saying "up-country Tamil parties must unite against Sinhala chauvinism."

DPF leader Mano Ganeshan explained the base electoral calculations behind the communal politics, declaring: "If Tamil voters are divided by voting for the ruling party, the opposition UNP or for us, a Tamil representative can't win this election."

The claim that "electing a Tamil representative" will help workers is a fraud. These unions have been directly responsible for imposing the demands of the plantation companies on workers. As part of successive governments, they have presided over deepening attacks on the working class, as a whole as well as the systematic discrimination against Tamils. CWC and UPF ministers are part of the Rajapakse government that has cut back subsidies and sent prices for basic items such as food, fuel and transport soaring.

All the plantation unions are responsible for the collective agreements that have imposed high productivity targets in return for a pitiful rise in the poverty-level wages of plantation workers. In 2006, 2008 and 2010 hundreds of thousands of workers defied the CWC's sell-out deals with management. But the DPF and UPF, which postured as "opponents" of the deals in order to defuse the anger of workers, accepted the agreements and shut down the strikes and protests.

The union leaders claim to represent all Tamils, but they act in the interests of a privileged Tamil elite. These bureaucrats running the unions are wealthy

businessmen, some of whom own their own plantations. Their luxurious lifestyles have nothing in common with those of workers and their families who are struggling to survive and lack decent housing, health care and education for their children.

During the island's 30-year civil war, successive Colombo governments maintained a police state regime in the plantation districts. The security forces constantly harassed workers and youth treating them all as suspected members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Some were arrested and tortured. While the unions issued mild criticisms of the abuse of democratic rights, they backed the communal war. The CWC is on record as providing lists to the police of Tamil youth to be arrested.

The oppressive conditions facing plantation workers were established under British colonial rule but continued after so-called independence in 1948. One of the first acts of the Sri Lankan ruling class was to abolish the citizenship rights of around a million Tamil-speaking estate workers. In 1964, the Sirima-Sasri Pact with New Delhi laid the basis for the forced repatriation of half a million workers to southern India where many still live in squalor.

While the government and the unions claim that estate workers now have their rights, they are still treated as second class citizens. The root cause of this oppression lies in the system of capitalist exploitation, which all of the unions police on behalf of the plantation companies and the government.

Ex-left groups such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP) function as political apologists for the unions and their leaders. The NSSP and USP, which have promoted the DPF as a champion of the rights of working people, have joined the DPF in an alliance with the right-wing UNP. However, neither party has uttered a word about the DPF's new electoral front with allies of the Rajapakse government.

The Rajapakse government has called the provincial elections in preparation for a new offensive against the living standards of working people as dictated by the

International Monetary Fund.

The only way to defend the rights of plantation workers is reject communalism and to fight for the unity of Sinhala and Tamil workers against the government's austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

The SEP and its forerunner, the Revolutionary Communist League, have a long record of defending plantation workers. In May, the SEP held a plantation workers congress in Hatton to advance a socialist perspective for the working class.

That conference called on workers to break from the unions, organise their own rank-and-file action committees in every estate and turn to other sections of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally facing similar attacks.

This fight must be based on socialist policies to nationalise the banks, major industries and plantation companies under the democratic control of the working class. Above all what is necessary is a political struggle against the Rajapakse government and the bringing to power a workers' and peasants' government.

This is the program fought for by the SEP. We call on plantation workers to vote for our slate of candidates in the Kegalla district, to study our perspective and to join and build the SEP as the mass party of the working class.



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