

Sri Lankan unions prepare political trap for plantation workers

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Mano Ganeshan, the leader of the Democratic People's Front (DPF) and its trade union wing the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC), announced recently that he would initiate the formation of a new trade union federation of plantation workers (TUFPW) in Sri Lanka.

The TUFPW's aim is supposedly to "safeguard" and "fight for" the rights of plantation workers "from government ally, Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), traditionally the biggest union among plantation workers, and Lanka Jaathika Estate Workers Union, the trade union wing of the opposition United National Party."

The real purpose is the opposite. The TUFPW is being formed not to fight for the interests of plantation workers, but to establish a new mechanism to prevent the development of a working class movement against the companies and the government.

An explosive situation is already developing among the plantation workers, due to their soaring cost of living and oppressive working conditions. Next April the existing collective agreement between the trade unions and plantation companies expires. Many workers are already bitter about the previous sell-out agreement imposed by the CWC—with the assistance of all of the other plantation unions, including the DWC.

Under these conditions, Ganeshan is preparing a new political trap for workers. He and his DWC are joined by unions that also have a long and treacherous history. These include the Upcountry People's Front (UPF) and National Union of Workers (NUW), which also function as political parties and are part of the ruling coalition government.

As such these organisations are directly politically

responsible for President Mahinda Rajapakse's austerity measures, including cuts to social spending and price hikes on basic items such as food, fuel and transport. Every section of the working class has been hard hit by inflation.

Ganeshan told the media that the new union federation would be "a clear challenge" to the CWC and that his federation "would deal with the Employers' Federation of Ceylon from a position of strength in negotiating a new wage for plantation workers."

In response, CWC leader Mutthu Sivalingam, who is also a government minister, said that his union constituted the majority of plantation workers and declared that "if anyone believes they can challenge the CWC let them try."

The comment is not just a challenge, but a threat. The CWC has previously used physical violence, and collaborated with the police, not only against its rivals, but against any opposition by plantation workers.

However, the new TUFPW is no alternative for workers. Ganeshan is seeking to exploit the hostility of plantation workers, not to fight for better wages and conditions, but to boost the standing of his union body with employers as an instrument for policing workers.

Like the CWC, Ganeshan is mired in communal politics that is used to drive a wedge between Tamil and Sinhala workers. While he now declares his opposition to the CWC, his DPF formed an electoral bloc with the CWC and the Upcountry People's Front in elections this year for the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council. Ganeshan declared that "electing a Tamil representative" would help Tamil workers. As a result, two CWC members were

elected who have voted for the government's policies, including its attacks on workers.

Workers should study the record of Ganeshan's DWC and the other unions that have joined the TUFPW. While the CWC, Lanka Jaathika Estate Workers Union, and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre have colluded with the government to reach sell-out deals with employers, the DWC, NUW and UPF have postured as critics in order to better suppress angry workers.

In 2006, half a million plantation workers went on strike for two weeks for higher wages. After the CWC and associated unions signed an agreement for a combined daily wage of 290 rupees (\$US2.25), tens of thousands of workers protested on the streets against the deal and denouncing the signatory unions.

The DWC, NUW and UPF, along with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led All Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (ACPWU), claimed to oppose the agreement and promised to fight for its cancellation. Two weeks later, these unions shut down any action. The police issued arrest notices against dozens of workers for attacking a CWC office. The unions did nothing to defend workers, advising them instead to rely on the police.

In September 2009, amid a campaign for higher pay, the CWC and its allies signed a collective agreement for a 405-rupee daily wage. Amid bitter opposition by workers, the DWC, NUW and UPF called a press conference and again promised "tougher action", but only after the traditional Deepavali festival on October 17. A week later they fell in behind the signatory unions.

In 2011, the unions were nervous about any campaign for higher pay, fearing it would quickly slip out of their control. The union leaders were well aware that the revolutionary movements in Tunisia and Egypt had resonated with workers in Sri Lanka. CWC leader Sivalingam advised the unions "to finish the matter immediately" and agreed to a 515-rupees daily wage.

The DWC, NUW, UPF and ACPWU held no strikes or protests, but called for a go-slow campaign to let off steam among the workers. At the same time, these unions shamelessly appealed to the government to "intervene and give a reasonable salary for plantation workers." But Rajapakse backed the deal and the unions caved in.

It is already clear that employers will bitterly resist any significant pay rise next year. The Sri Lankan tea industry has been hard hit by the world economic slump, amid greater competition from other tea producing countries such as Kenya, Bangladesh and Vietnam.

The Plantation Association of Ceylon (PAC) warned recently that Ceylon Tea "may be ousted from its position as the premium global tea." As in every other industry, the PAC is seeking to place new burdens on workers, calling for a "surge in productivity" to reduce "labor costs [that] account for about 70 percent of total manufacturing costs."

Ganeshan has already expressed his willingness to collaborate with employers, saying that TUFPW "would act collectively with the Employers' Federation on matters relating to workers." This is a clear signal that the TUFPW will betray any struggle by workers that is left in its hands.

To oppose the ongoing attacks on living and working conditions requires a unified struggle of plantation workers with the rest of the working class. Unification does not mean alliances of trade unions that function as the agents of government and the employers, but rather the building of an independent movement of workers. The Socialist Equality Party calls for a rebellion against all the trade unions and for the formation of independent action committees to wage a political struggle against employers and the government.

Such a fight can only be based on a socialist and internationalist program and the rejection of all forms of communalism and nationalism. Decent wages and conditions for all workers will be won in the political struggle for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies as part of the fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally. That is the revolutionary perspective for which the Socialist Equality Party fights.



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