

Sri Lankan plantation workers must oppose wage struggle betrayal

M. Thevarajah—Socialist Equality Party election candidate and group leader for the Nuwara Eliya district
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on all plantation workers to oppose the trade unions' betrayal of the "go-slow" campaign for a 1,000-rupee daily wage, and demand the dropping of all charges against, and the immediate release of, seven workers from Ingestre Estate. The Ingestre Estate workers at Dickoya, Hatton were arrested after the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) bureaucracy called off the "go-slow" on July 16.

The CWC, which is led by tea planter, former government minister and Nuwara Eliya MP Arumugam Thondaman, stopped the 10-day long wage campaign not because tea estate workers were reluctant to fight, but precisely for the opposite reason. The CWC cynically declared that the campaign had to end because of the approaching August 17 parliamentary elections and claimed it would hold discussions with employers after the national ballot. This is a lie.

The CWC and the other estate unions—the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU), the National Union of Workers (NUW) and the Up Country People's Front (UPF)—are variously aligned with Sri Lanka's bourgeois parties. All these unions are running candidates in the election. They seek seats in parliament, not to serve the interests of their members or challenge the profit system but to win privileges and gain ministerial positions.

The LJEWU, the NUW and the UPF are directly connected with the United National Party government and opposed the go-slow from the outset. NUW leader P. Digamparam is the minister for estate infrastructure, whilst LJEWU president K.V. Velautham is the state minister of plantations. Both openly campaigned against the go-slow.

The CWC, in fact, initiated the limited industrial campaign to dissipate the rising anger of union

members over their poverty-level wages and degrading living conditions. Its purpose was to prevent a major confrontation with the plantation companies and the government.

Ingestre Estate employees, however, maintained the industrial action while plantation workers at Agrapatana, Norwood, Bogawanthalawa and Kandy in the central hills held protests demanding the campaign continue. The Agrapatana workers carried a banner saying: "Don't use the election as a pretext. We want a decent salary increase."

The immediate consequence of the CWC betrayal was the arrest of seven Ingestre Estate workers on bogus charges of "threatening an estate manager." The Ingestre Estate workers were framed-up because they defied the CWC's July 16 directive. When estate management refused to accept plucked tea on July 20, the workers dumped the leaves near the manager's bungalow in protest.

After management responded by calling the police, estate workers prevented any arrests. The next day, management told the seven workers to report to Norwood police, assuring them that they would not be arrested. The workers were taken into custody at the police station, arrested for threatening management and remanded for seven days. They could face criminal charges.

The plantation companies are determined to drive up production. When the previous collective agreement ended in April, Planters' Association head Roshan Rajadurai demanded that the daily quota for plucked tea leaves be increased from the current 16-18 kilos to 25 kilos, with no wage increase. This was necessary, he declared, so Sri Lankan tea could compete on the world market with exports from China, India, Vietnam and Kenya.

The Ceylon Employer's Federation (CEF) rejected outright the 1,000-rupee daily wage during discussions with the plantation unions on July 15 and offered a contemptible 60-rupee increase to the current 450-rupee daily wage, with an 80-rupee allowance tied to increased productivity. Plantation companies are preparing to wage class war against estate workers. This is the meaning of the arrest of the seven workers at Ingestre, which follows the frame-up and victimisation of estate workers at the Deeside Division of the Glenugie Estate at Up-Cot.

The Deeside Division workers struck for three days in February, opposing management demands that they increase the daily harvest from 16 kilos to 18 kilos. While the CWC sabotaged the strike, the company was forced to withdraw the higher target. Management, however, concocted charges against seven workers, alleging that they physically attacked a field supervisor. Three workers were sacked and four others were suspended for a month. Management and a local CWC leader then encouraged a Deeside Division field supervisor to complain to police, so that the workers now face court action.

As the SEP has carefully explained, the CWC and the other estate unions are not working-class organisations, but function as industrial police for the plantation companies. This is demonstrated in their systematic imposition of collective agreements that increase workloads in exchange for meagre wage rises, ensuring that estate workers and their families remain in poverty, while the corporate elite reap massive profits. In every country the employers, working in collaboration with the unions, make the same demand: "Accept low wages; increase your productivity."

Militant industrial action alone cannot defeat the ever-increasing demands of the capitalist class and its political servants. The denial of decent wages, housing, healthcare, education and other basic facilities for plantation workers under British colonial rule has been long continued by the Sri Lankan national bourgeoisie. The exploitation is now being stepped up with the active assistance of the unions.

Plantation workers and other sections of the working class have to break from the unions and build action committees in every estate to defend their wages, living standards and basic rights. This requires a turn to broadest sections of the working class and the fight for

a workers' and peasants' government in line with the socialist and internationalist program advanced by the SEP. This includes the nationalisation of the major plantation companies and other key industries and the banks under workers' control. Unity must be forged with the international class brothers in this struggle.

This is the program being advanced by the SEP and its candidates in the Nuwara Eliya, Jaffna and Colombo districts in the August 17 general election. Above all, workers need a revolutionary party to guide this struggle. We urge workers and youth to support our struggle and join the SEP.



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