

# Major strike by Indian plantation workers for better pay

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Nearly 300,000 plantation workers at state-owned and private tea and rubber estates in Kerala began indefinite strike action on Monday, shutting down all plantations across the south Indian state.

On Thursday workers blocked roads and began *dharnas* (sit-in-protests) in several plantation towns throughout Kerala. The plantation workers are demanding their current 232-rupee (\$US3.55) daily wage be increased to 500 rupees and annual bonuses be lifted from 10 percent to 20 percent of their wages.

Plantation workers in Kerala are among the most impoverished sections of the Indian working class. While plantation workers only receive 232 rupees per day, coconut climbers are paid 1,250 rupees and casual labourers 700 rupees.

Monday's walkout was called by the joint council of unions. This includes the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and Centre of India Trade Unions (CITU)—affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM respectively—the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), aligned to the Congress Party, and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sabha (BMS), affiliated to the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The unions have called the strike not to defend wages and living standards but to try and dissipate the growing hostility of workers towards the union apparatuses and their affiliated political parties. The CPM and the CPI are part of the Kerala's opposition Left Democratic Front. The Congress Party leads the United Democratic Front (UDF) government in Kerala.

The unions were forced to call the strike in response to popular support for a nine-day walkout last month by about 6,000 workers employed by Kannan Devan Hills Plantations Limited (KDHPL) in Munnar. The mainly women workers struck in protest over a sell-out 10

percent bonus deal worked out in the tri-partite Plantation Labour Committee (PLC). The PLC involves the plantation owners, the unions and the state government.

The KDHPL workers, who demanded a 500-rupee daily wage and 20 percent bonus, attacked union offices and barred union officials from their meetings. This rebellion shocked both the ruling and opposition parties as well as their affiliated unions.

Kerala Chief Minister Oman Chandy personally intervened in an attempt to end the strike, declaring that the tea estate workers' wage demand would be considered "sympathetically" in PLC talks. While talks are still underway on the KDHPL wage claim, employers have agreed to pay a 20 percent bonus.

Following the end of Munnar strike, workers in other Kerala plantations began holding street protests to demand higher wages and bonuses. Terrified by these developments, union leaders held PLC talks with state government officials and plantation owners last Saturday in an attempt to negotiate a wage rise to contain the situation.

When the plantation owners refused to offer any daily increase, the joint council of unions decided to call a state-wide strike, fearful that they faced the eruption of mass industrial action outside their political control. Another round of PLC talks is scheduled for next Monday.

While the KDHPL tea workers were initially reluctant to join this week's indefinite strike action because it was called by the union bureaucracy, they decided on Wednesday to join the walkout.

Plantation owners are vehemently opposed to the 500-rupee daily wage demand. United Planters Association of Southern India (UPASI) president N. Dharmaraj rejected the claim, telling the media that it

was “impractical” because of “current economic realities, coupled with the plethora of taxes and levies.”

Kerala’s labour minister, Shibu Baby John, likened the Munnar tea workers strike to the “Jasmine Revolution” which erupted against the Egyptian and Tunisian governments in 2011. Utterly hostile to the pay rise, he declared that a 500-rupee daily wage would bring the Kerala tea plantations to a standstill. He said he was “not prepared to make impractical announcements in order to win applause.” Kerala Chief Minister Oommen Chandy said that his Congress-led government would not do anything that would destroy the plantation sector.

The plantation industry is facing a growing worldwide crisis as planters are locked in a cut-throat competition for international market share, each seeking to cut costs by slashing the meager pay and conditions of workers and imposing harsh production targets.

Kerala plantation workers’ struggle for higher wages and better conditions brings them into direct confrontation with the capitalist profit system. Workers need an independent political strategy, not just to fight the plantation companies but the India’s state and central governments and the trade unions that function as agents of the employers.

Workers must break from those unions and their affiliated parties, including the Stalinist CPM and CPI that are deeply integrated into the Indian political establishment. From 1991 through 2008, the CPM, CPI and their Left Front sustained in office a succession of capitalist governments, most of them Congress Party-led. And in those states where they have formed a government—West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura—the Stalinists have implemented what they themselves describe as “pro-investor” policies.

Workers must build their own independent action committees based on a socialist perspective, including the nationalisation of the plantations under workers’ control, and the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government.



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