

India: Kerala plantation workers denounce unions' wage sellout

WSWS reporting team
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Last month more than 300,000 tea, coffee, rubber and cardamom plantation workers in the south Indian state of Kerala took indefinite strike action. The walkout was to demand an increase in the daily wage, from 232 to 500 rupees (\$US7.55), and for annual bonuses to be lifted from 10 percent to 20 percent of wages. Plantation workers in Kerala are among the most impoverished sections of the Indian working class.

While the workers demonstrated their determination to fight, blocking roads and holding sit-down protests, a joint council of Indian plantation trade unions (JCTU) shut down the strike within 17 days, after negotiating an insignificant 69-rupee increase in the daily wage. The deal was worked out in six rounds of closed-door talks in the Plantation Labour Committee (PLC), a tripartite body of union bureaucrats, state government officials and plantation management representatives. (See: "Indian trade unions shut down Kerala plantation workers' strike")

The plantation unions called the state-wide strike not to defend wages and conditions but to dissipate workers' mounting hostility against the unions and their collaboration with the estate management. It was initiated in response to widespread popular support for a militant nine-day walkout of about 6,000, mainly women workers in Kannan Devan Hills plantation in Munnar in September.

The Munnar workers rebelled against their unions demanding a 500-rupee daily wage and 20 percent bonus. Workers angrily denounced the unions during the strike, attacking union offices and barring all union officials from their meetings.

A WSWS reporting team from Chennai recently visited the Kannan Devan Hills and Harrison Malayalam tea estates in Kerala's Induki district. The estates are run by the Tata Company and RPG

Enterprises respectively. The team distributed Tamil- and Malayalam-language versions of WSWS articles on the recent strike and its betrayal by the unions.

WSWS reporters were threatened with physical violence by a group of thugs in the Devikulam division of the Kannan Devan estate. They demanded that the reporting team immediately leave the area. The thugs appeared to be supporters of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist party of India-Marxist (CPM) and wanted to prevent any discussion on the political lessons of the recent strike.

Rajaiah, 66, a retired worker with 48 years' service at the Devikulam plantation, spoke to the WSWS team before it was threatened by the thugs. Like most of the plantation workers in Munnar, Rajaiah came from the Tirunelveli district of neighbouring Tamil Nadu state. His monthly pension is just 800 rupees.

"My daughter works in the plantation. Her take-home salary is around 1,500 rupees, after various deductions, including the cost of fire wood," he said. He explained that although there were water pipes in the estate, the workers still had to hand-carry water to their rooms. "We have very poor medical facilities here. We're given the same tablets for stomach aches or fevers but if we are seriously ill they send us to the Government Hospital. It's free but we are not looked after well there, forcing us to go to private hospitals."

Rajaiah was critical of the unions and supported the Munnar tea workers' rebellion: "The unions get all the kick-backs they want and only called the strike after the protests of the Munnar women workers. There was more awareness among plantation workers and so the unions felt threatened."

"The CPM and CPI are just a waste—they're both good for nothing. During election times they boast about this and that but for the workers they've done

nothing. All political parties blame each other but none of them have any concern about the people.”

WSWS reporters met many workers from the Harrison Malayalam estate. **Salim**, a CPM branch secretary and Tata Global Beverage employee, criticised the role of the unions and the political parties in the local area. “The performance of the communists [CPM] in Munnar region is bad. They’ve united with the capitalists. All the political parties are worthless,” he said.

Salim explained that the Kannan Devan Tea Company had provided quarters for CPM union leaders and Congress party officials who were working with the company to suppress workers struggles. He claimed, however, that the CPM was doing “good things” in other areas.

When it was explained that the 34-year CPM-led Left Front government of West Bengal was thrown out of office in protest against pro-investor economic reform measures, he admitted that their “performance was not right.”

Salim said that he was not supporting the official CPM candidate in the local government elections but an independent candidate from the Women Right movement. “In this way I’m registering my opposition to the party’s position on the Munnar tea workers strike. There are many independent candidates from the communist parties running in the local elections against the official party candidates,” he said.

Rejina, a female plantation worker, said the workers went on strike because the management refused to consider their bonus demands. “The management increases our wages by only 5 or 10 rupees every two or three years. This is insufficient to manage the family expenses”

George, 45, has been working in the plantation for over 20 years. He said: “I don’t have any good opinions about the trade unions. The wage rise granted after strike is not enough and there will be definitely victimisation of some workers. We will continue this struggle again.

“The claims by a CITU [Centre of Indian Trade Unions, the CPM’s union federation] leader that the workers are satisfied with wage rise settlement are a lie. We’re against the CITU over this treacherous deal and since the unions made this agreement management has begun increasing the workload. CPM veteran leader

Achuthanandan came here and said we would get a ‘proper wage.’ This is political posturing.”

George denounced both the Congress party-led United Democratic Front (UDF) state government and the CPM-led opposition Left Democratic Front (LDF).

Shanti, 45, who has worked in the tea estates for 25 years, said: “We were under a lot of stress during the strike. If I work for 26 days I only receive 5,000 rupees. After deductions for the FSF [Future Saving Fund] and the electricity bill, my net salary is only 3,000 rupees. We are tea pluckers and yet we have to pay 42 rupees for half a kilogram of tea that they sell us.”

Pointing to their “lines” (rows of small two-room workers’ quarters) she said: “Please take a look at our hut. Is that good enough for four people to live in? But what can we do about it?

“Tea plucking involves three different tasks. One is weeding, the second is plucking the high-quality leaves and the third is cleaning and trimming the tea bushes. Our hands are worn after this and yet after all this they are demanding more production and scold us for ‘doing slow work.’ The company says our target is 25 kilos but they make us do more work for extra kilos”

Shanti said that all trade unions, including the CPM-affiliated CITU and the CPI-affiliated All India Trade Union Congress, “are united against workers.”



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