

A socialist perspective to defend Sri Lankan plantation workers

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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More than 200,000 plantation workers in Sri Lanka have been forced to work for an unprecedented nine months without a new wage contract, after the previous one expired in March. The Planters' Association (PA) has rejected, not only a new daily wage of 1,000 rupees (\$US7) initially proposed by the trade unions, but any pay rise, and is seeking to make deep inroads into the living standards of workers.

The unions have colluded with the government and employers to block any struggle by estate workers for decent pay and conditions. With the complicity of the unions, police arrested dozens of workers in May and again in July in the Maskeliya and Norwood plantations in the Nuwara-Eliya district and the Ganepalla estate in Kegalle district. Their "crime" was to take action to oppose the unfair and arbitrary increase of workloads and they now face court on trumped-up charges.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that workers can defend nothing without a complete break with the trade unions, which function as the industrial police for employers and the government. We call for the establishment of independent fighting organisations, Action Committees, in every plantation and factory based on a socialist program to defend wages and working conditions.

The scope of the assault on plantation workers was outlined in an emergency meeting called by the Tea Exporters Association, with the participation of the PA and Sri Lanka Tea Factory Owners Association, which was reported recently on the Daily FT.lk website.

Under conditions of worsening global economic crisis, employers confront intensifying competition for markets and falling commodity prices, including for Sri Lankan exports of tea and rubber. As a result, a loss of 2,850 million rupees (\$US19.9 million) was reported by 19 of the 22 major plantation companies during last year alone.

The emergency meeting focussed on putting the burden of the tea crisis onto the working class. It called for a system of "revenue sharing as a model for improving productivity." Each worker would be allocated 1,500 to 2,000 tea bushes to

look after and harvest, and would be given a share of the revenue. The system would effectively atomise the working class, and turn employees into "share croppers" at the mercy of the company and global markets.

PA chairman Roshan Rajadurai also called for an end to all social spending on plantation workers. He presented a list of expenses that should be abolished, including statutory requirements such as employer contributions to the Employees Provident Fund and the Employees Trust Fund, on which workers rely in retirement.

Rajadurai complained that plantation companies already spend 1,100 rupees a day per worker. In fact, the daily gross pay of a worker is only 620 rupees and can be even lower after deductions for days absent and unfulfilled targets. What the PA is targeting is all those benefits that have been traditionally granted to workers or won in struggle, including paid leave, medical support, child care services and housing. The employers do not regard these as basic rights for workers but as illegitimate deductions from company profits.

Employers are pressing for a far-reaching restructuring of the work regime that will abolish all social benefits, while empowering management to unilaterally decide production targets for each worker, as well as the payment per kilogram of leaves.

The PA is dragging out negotiations and enlisting the support of the government and trade unions in imposing these harsh measures on the workforce. Citing cash flow problems, it emphasised the need for government support to "extend the existing Collective Agreement on wages for a further one year period" and to "strike a deal with the trade unions."

PA chairman Rajadurai told the media: "The future sustainability and survival of the industry, to a great degree, is in the hands of the workers themselves." As in the past, the trade unions will peddle the same line, insisting that the workforce must sacrifice to boost corporate profits or face huge job losses.

All the trade unions have played an utterly treacherous role in suppressing any independent struggle by plantation

workers.

* In 2006, amid a huge strike movement, the unions fell into line when President Mahinda Rajapakse accused them of sabotaging the war effort against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

* In 2009, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) signed a sell-out deal with employers while the Upcountry People's Front (UPF) and other oppositional unions claimed to support a go-slow campaign by tens of thousands of workers. But this was only to bring the opposition of workers under control and shut it down.

* In 2011, the trade unions, under government pressure, hurriedly signed a collective agreement with the companies that tied workers to a no-strike clause for two years in return for an insignificant wage rise. When workers took strike action against arbitrary increases to production targets, the CWC declared their action illegal and collaborated with management and the police to intimidate the strikers.

* In 2013, the unions secretly signed a collective agreement in violation of the democratic rights of plantation workers which granted another meagre wage increase in exchange for a productivity clause that is being exploited to arbitrarily increase the workload of workers.

All the unions are tied in one way or another to the political establishment. The CWC was part of the previous government and did its bidding. The leaders of the UPF, the National Union of Workers (NUW) and Democratic Workers Union (DWU) are all ministers in the present government. They promised a wage rise to plantation workers after the August parliamentary election, but then denounced the CWC for demanding too much!

Workers should have no illusions in President Maithripala Sirisena, who was installed with Washington's backing in the January election, or the United National Party (UNP) government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The UNP and Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) are both big business parties with long records of defending corporate profit at the expense of working people.

Sirisena and Wickremesinghe came to power claiming to have carried out a "democratic revolution." Yet, not even a year in office, the government has used the police against rural protesters demanding clean drinking water and students demonstrating in defence of free education, as well as plantation workers taking action to defend conditions.

In May 2012, the SEP held a plantation workers' congress that urged workers to draw the necessary political conclusions from the decades of betrayals by the trade unions. We called on workers to make a complete break, organisationally and politically, with the unions and to build independent Action Committees on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Those tasks become even more urgent today amid the deepening crisis of global capitalism. The tea plantations in Sri Lanka are going to be restructured. The only question is which class is going to do it—the bourgeoisie or the working class? The plantation companies, in collusion with the government and the unions, have made clear their reactionary agenda. Plantations workers have to give their answer.

We propose a unified fight based on the following demands:

* Citizenship rights to all plantation workers!

* A guaranteed monthly living wage indexed to the cost of living!

* No to increased workloads! Jobs for unemployed youth on equal pay!

* Decent housing, health and education facilities for all!

The SEP statement in 2012 explained:

"The full realisation of these elementary demands is impossible under the capitalist ownership of the plantations, run for private profit. The SEP and IYSSE advocate the nationalisation of the plantations under the democratic control of the working class.

"Plantation workers must turn to other sections of the working class and to the oppressed rural masses, whose living standards are also under assault, in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement a socialist program. Society must be refashioned from top to bottom to meet the basic social needs of working people, not the profits of a tiny wealthy elite. The SEP and IYSSE fight for the establishment of a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally."

We call on plantation workers to contact the SEP in order to initiate a broad discussion on this political program and perspective.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact