

# Sri Lankan plantation unions conspire with government and employers

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On June 2, the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), a plantation-based trade union combine, announced a new wage deal for estate workers.

The agreement was hatched behind the backs of workers. It followed discussions with a cabinet subcommittee headed by Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and is conditional on negotiations between the plantation companies and the unions for even more back-breaking workloads. Wickremesinghe will chair the negotiations.

The TPA consists of the Democratic People's Front, the National Union of Workers and the Up-country Peoples Front, led by Mano Ganeshan, P. Digambaram and V. Radhakrishnan, respectively. All are ministers in Wickremesinghe's government.

Under the new deal, plantation companies will receive state treasury-guaranteed bank loans to pay a temporary 100-rupee (\$US0.69) daily wage rise from April, until a new collective agreement is finalised before the end of this month.

The plantation companies want to abolish the current daily-wage system and replace it with a "revenue-sharing" scheme to slash costs and drive up productivity.

The previous collective agreement between the trade unions and the plantation companies ended in March 2015. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which is still the largest plantation union, demanded a 1,000-rupee daily wage, up from the current 620 rupees. Other unions, including those in the TPA, backed this demand.

Last July, the CWC called a "work-to-rule" industrial campaign but quickly shut it down, citing the approaching August national elections. The CWC's real concern, however, was that in the face of adamant refusals by the plantation companies to grant any increase, industrial action by estate workers would escalate into a major struggle.

The union later dropped its demand for a 1,000-rupee

daily wage, calling for the 2,500-rupee monthly wage rise for private sector employees announced in the budget to be extended to plantation workers. In other words, plantation workers, who get 25 days' work per month, would receive only a 100-rupee daily increase.

On May 25, the TPA called a one-day strike to press this demand. The industrial action, however, was dropped and replaced with a harmless "sit down protest" by TPA leaders in central Colombo on May 26.

The following day, Planters Association chairman Roshan Rajadurai rejected the 100-rupee pay rise demand, claiming ongoing losses in the tea and rubber sectors. The plantation companies have pointed to declining Sri Lankan tea exports due to the ongoing global recession and the escalating war crisis in the Middle East.

The TPA government ministers responded by initiating discussions with Wickremesinghe's cabinet subcommittee. The purpose of the temporary 100-rupee daily increase is to dissipate workers' growing anger.

Under the deal, the unions and estate companies will begin talks on the Planters Association's demands for a revenue-sharing system and the abolition of fixed working hours. Plantation workers would be assigned a certain number of tea bushes or tea-planted areas of an estate, with the company providing fertiliser, chemicals and equipment.

The new scheme will further impoverish tens of thousands of tea estate workers, transforming them into share-croppers at the beck and call of the plantation companies.

Plantation workers are among the most exploited and poverty-stricken sections of the working class. There are 22 plantation companies, employing around 200,000 workers, who live in barrack-like line rooms without adequate facilities.

Following last week's union-cabinet subcommittee discussions, Plantation Industries Minister Navin

Dissanayake told the state-owned *Sunday Observer* he had initiated discussions with the Regional Plantation Companies and the trade unions on “a new out-grower model.” This, he declared, was so “plantation workers can be given legal rights over the land—the land will belong to them, and they will pluck more tea.”

The estate unions, which function as an industrial police force for the employers, have told their members nothing about their discussion with the government and the Planters Association.

While workers have previously engaged in various isolated actions against company increases in the tea-plucking output—from 16 to 18 kilograms per day to 20 to 24 kilograms—the union leaders have quickly stopped these protests and in some estates directly conspired with company managements and police to frame-up militant workers.

The plantation unions do not represent workers’ interests—most of their officials are businessmen or planters—but directly defend the companies and the government.

The CWC backed the previous Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman, a cabinet minister in Rajapakse’s administration, is now seeking an accommodation with the Wickremesinghe government.

National Union of Workers leader P. Digambaram and V. Radhakrishnan Digambaram, from the Up-country People’s Front, also supported Rajapakse’s anti-democratic rule. Last year they changed sides, helping install Maithripala Sirisena as president—in a regime-change operation orchestrated by Washington to bring a pro-US government to power in Colombo.

TPA officials Ganeshan, Digambaram and Radhakrishnan are cynically claiming to have won a wage rise for estate workers. This is a lie. All of the plantation unions are preparing to impose an historic assault on workers’ wages, living conditions and social rights.



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