

Sri Lankan plantation workers demand higher wages

Our correspondents

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Unrest is growing among Sri Lankan estate workers as plantation companies refuse to increase wages and move instead to abolish the existing wage structure and impose a revenue-sharing scheme, akin to a share-cropping system. The previous collective agreement expired 15 months ago.

The plantation unions are currently collaborating with the companies and the government to impose this attack on these workers, who are among the most oppressed section of the Sri Lankan working class.

Plantation workers from Hatton and Maskeliya in the central hills district spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters last week about their worsening working and living conditions, voicing their anger over the companies and the unions.

Workers at Ingestre estate at Dickoya near Hatton were involved in a bitter struggle last year against the suspension of seven workers in July 2015. The seven workers were victimised because they protested over low wages. The estate management continuously harasses its employees.

Kamala said the Ingestre estate refused to reinstate her after she took maternity leave. "Management is delaying my 25,000-rupee maternity and gratuity funds because of this and now I'm employed as a casual worker," she said. "They want to increase casual labor. Retired employees and workers who return after working two years in the Middle East on approved leave are hired as casual workers. The new recruiters are not regulated.

"The company only pays 30 rupees per kilo of tea leaves. How can we earn enough income when there's not enough to harvest? Some days I only pluck seven kilos. My salary last month was 4,000 rupees (\$US28)."

Leaders of the Democratic People's Front (DPF), the

National Union of Workers (NUW) and the Up-country People's Front (UPF) recently announced that the government would provide the companies with loan funding to pay a 100-rupee increase in the daily wage.

Another plantation worker angrily denounced the deal. "Even if this pittance is paid, it won't be enough to buy a kilo of sugar. These days a kilo of sugar costs 130 rupees, a coconut 50 rupees and a kilo of wheat flour 98 rupees. And with this meagre salary we are supposed to educate our children. The unions collect membership fees but they are not concerned about our problems."

Krisnasamy, a construction worker, explained that he lost his job because of company cost-cutting. He opposed the abolition of the wage system and the imposition of "revenue sharing." Under the new system a workers' family is assigned a certain number of tea bushes or part of an estate to maintain and pluck tea leaves, which are then supplied to the company. The plantation pays the worker after deducting its expenses.

Krisnasamy called on plantation workers to reject this exploitative system and said he supported the Socialist Equality Party's campaign to defend the victimised Ingestre workers. Krisnasamy, who had visited tea plantations in the south Indian state of Tamil, said: "I visited the plantations at Ootti, and working and living conditions there are even worse than ours. Their daily wage is just 120 Indian rupees or \$1.80. As you say, workers must unite all over the world to fight against this capitalist system."

Selva said plantation workers cultivate vegetables and find part-time jobs because their wages are so low. "I wear this clothing from morning to night. The government provides us nothing. The unions use workers as trump cards and get privileges. I've stopped paying subscriptions to the unions."

Selva explained there had previously been a doctor for each estate division but a doctor from the town hospital now had to cover five divisions. Injured workers had to find their own transport to the local hospital because ambulance services had stopped.

Many families in Ingestre live in temporary sheds. **Narendiran** and his family live in a mud hut. “One side of my shed collapsed in the last rains. There are nine temporary sheds around here,” he said.

Anthony is from Glenugie estate in Maskeliya, where three workers were sacked and another four were suspended from the company’s Deeside division. They were victimised after they were accused of leading a strike against management’s productivity demands. He complained that management had stopped repairing workers’ homes.

“The roof sheets of my house are damaged and the walls get wet when it rains. We have to keep buckets inside our home whenever it rains. We are the third generation living in this home without any repairs having been made by the estate,” he said.

Anthony said workers had to pluck 20 kilos per day to complete their 16-kilo target because management cut two kilos for water on the leaves and another two kilos for a commission.

One worker said she had quit the Ceylon Workers Congress and joined the NUW but that it was also useless.

“None of these unions defend workers’ interests,” she said, and pointed out that many workers and youth had left her estate and moved to Colombo because they could not earn enough to live in the estates.

She said estate workers labour from eight in the morning until 3.30 p.m. without lunch because the tea bushes are too far away. “We take bread and plain tea to the fields for lunch. By lunch time the bread is dry and the tea cold. If the price of essentials is not going to be reduced, then our salaries must be increased. The unions originally demanded 1,000 rupees per day but now they have abandoned this call.

“I’ve visited the Maha Uva estate, which has a revenue-sharing system. Each worker has been allocated 1,600 tea bushes but if the bushes have no leaves they don’t have any income. These workers are facing severe difficulties. We should not accept such a system.”

Krisna, from Ann Field estate at Hatton, said half

that 87-hectare estate is now closed and has become forest again. “There are 110 casual workers at Ann Field division but the permanent workers have been reduced to 60,” he said.

Krisna said a union official told him that Planters Association chairman Roshan Rajadurai declared that when car workers went on strike for a wage increase in Japan, the owner shut down the company and merged it with a more technologically developed firm, sacking many people. “The Planters Association boss Rajadurai said that if estate workers demanded a wage rise they would face the same consequences.”

Chandra from Ann Field estate opposed the revenue sharing system. “Today, the company pays 30 rupees per kilo of leaves,” she said. “Tomorrow, they will reduce that even to 10 rupees, saying that tea prices have gone down, and we would be compelled to give the leaves because we can’t eat them. It’s true the trade unions are helping the companies impose this system on us.”



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