

Sri Lankan plantation workers' struggle: Build action committees, fight for socialist policies

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan tea estate workers have been engaged in protest actions since September 26, demanding decent pay and better working conditions, in opposition to the attempt by the companies and government to impose a wage system tied to productivity.

Initially, the local leaders of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC)—a widely discredited plantation trade union—called a protest for two hours at two estates in Bogawantalawa and Upcot in the Nuwara Eliya district to defuse workers' anger. However, under conditions of deep-going discontent among the workers, the protest has triggered unrest that is spreading throughout the plantation area.

One and a half years ago, the CWC formulated the demand for a daily wage of 1,000 rupees (\$US6.86), an increase of 380 rupees. Despite the limited character of the union's campaign for this demand, workers have spontaneously stopped work for several hours to join demonstrations and pickets. They have blocked main roads in plantation area towns and defied police intimidation unleashed by the government in collaboration with union leaders.

This unfolding struggle sharply poses the need for workers to establish new forms of organisation and a new leadership, to fight for a political program to defend wages, jobs and working conditions and defeat the onslaught of the capitalist companies, which are backed by the government and assisted by the trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers on every estate to form their own democratically-elected action committees, independent of the trade unions, and to take up the fight for socialist policies and

a workers and peasants government.

The unions did not call for or initially support the protests. The unions organised in the Tamil Progressive Alliance—the National Union of Workers (NUW), Upcountry People's Front (UPF) and Democratic Workers Congress (DWC)—only declared their “support” on Tuesday.

On the contrary, the leaders of the NUW, UPF and DWC—P. Digambaram, V. Radhakrishnan and Mano Ganeshan respectively—are seeking to manipulate and suppress the eruption of opposition by plantation workers. These unions will line up with the employers and the government, and try to ensure that the demands of workers are suppressed.

The NUW, UPF and DWC, along with the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU)—controlled by the ruling right-wing United National Party (UNP)—are partners in the coalition government and their leaders hold ministerial and deputy ministerial posts.

These unions backed the US-sponsored regime change operation, during the January 2015 election, to install Maithripala Sirisena as president. The CWC, which was part of the previous governments led by President Mahinda Rajapakse, is now negotiating to join the UNP-led coalition.

These unions have a notorious record of backing police repression and company witch-hunts of workers and youth in the plantations. Workers have accused a local NUW leader of prompting the police to take out a court order to ban a protest in Maskeliya last Sunday.

Undoubtedly, the unions are already engaged in negotiations behind closed doors with the companies and the government for a rotten deal to boost company profits at the direct expense of the workers.

Confronting a worsening global crisis in the tea and rubber industries, the Sri Lankan plantation companies have rejected any wage increase and demanded greater productivity, with the backing of the government.

After the last wage agreement expired in March 2015, Planters Association chairman Roshan Rajadurai declared that the companies could not accept a pay rise of even one rupee. He proposed a “revenue sharing system”—in effect a share-cropper system—whereby a family would be allocated between 1,200 and 1,500 tea bushes to tend, and would receive a share of the revenue after the harvest. He insisted that without high productivity and low labour costs, the plantation companies could not compete on the world market.

The unions supported company plans to increase the tea plucking targets but in many estates the workers resisted. The Employers Federation has now proposed a “hybrid system” or two-tier system—a daily wage of 720 rupees, including a 100-rupee variable allowance for 12 days a month, and 13 days of wages directly dependent on productivity. According to Rajadurai, this system would be a “rehearsal” for the revenue sharing system.

The government supports the employers’ plan and demands it be expedited. At the same time, it is also discussing plans to assist the companies in dismantling many “unviable” estates and switching to other crops—with the loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

The assault on plantation workers is part of a broader attack on the living conditions and social rights of workers and the poor. The government is implementing the austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund, including tax increases, prices rises for essential items, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and cutbacks to public education and health.

Amid the deepening crisis of world capitalism, workers in every country face similar onslaughts on their wages, jobs, living conditions and basic democratic and social rights.

To have a decent life, plantation workers need a guaranteed monthly wage indexed to the cost of living; proper housing, health care and education; jobs for young people and full citizenship rights for all plantation workers. They also need an end to backbreaking workloads.

None of these essential social rights can be achieved under capitalism and the private ownership of the

plantations. The plantation companies are destroying even the current oppressive living conditions. What is necessary is the nationalisation of the plantations under workers’ control as part of the broader transformation of society on socialist lines.

This struggle requires workers in the plantations to turn to their class brothers and sisters in other sectors in Sri Lanka and globally, in the common struggle for socialist internationalism, that is, the reorganisation of society to meet the pressing needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

To fight for this perspective, workers need new organisations. That is why the Socialist Equality Party is urging workers to take matters into their own hands, break from the unions and form their own independent rank-and-file action committees, committed to socialist policies and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government. It is urgent that workers in every plantation elect their own action committees to form the basis for a joint committee, which will coordinate the struggle throughout the plantations and other sectors.

Above all, this political struggle needs revolutionary leadership. The SEP is the party that fights for this perspective in Sri Lanka. We urge workers and youth to join the SEP and to build it as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.



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