Sri Lankan plantation workers protest union wage deal

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Sri Lankan plantation workers held widespread protests voicing their anger against a new collective agreement signed by unions and companies last Tuesday. The deal, which is endorsed by the Sri Lankan government, locks workers into increased workloads for the next two years in exchange for a negligible wage rise. Full details of the agreement have not been revealed to workers.

Since September 26, tens of thousands of plantation workers across the country have held demonstrations, pickets and strikes demanding a 1,000-rupee ($US6.79) daily wage, an increase of 380 rupees.

Workers protested in many plantations on Tuesday demanding that the unions reject employer and government proposals. Demonstrations continued the next day at Stockholm, Strathspey and Ladbroke in Upcot near Hatton.

Estate workers blocked roads and chanted slogans: “Reject the new collective agreement! Tear up the agreement! We need 1,000 rupees wage per day! Don’t pay membership subscriptions to unions!” At some estates workers hoisted black flags to express their opposition.

Under the new deal, the daily wage will be increased by only 110 rupees to 730 rupees. This amount, however, is not stable, because the basic daily wage for the first three days of work has increased by just 50, from 450 to 500 rupees. The price supplement share of 30 rupees per day remains unchanged and is dependent on tea prices. The attendance allowance has also been reduced from 140 rupees per day to 60 rupees and only paid to workers who maintain 75 percent attendance out of 25 monthly working days.

A new 140-rupee productivity incentive has also been introduced. This will only be paid if the worker reaches targets set by each estate. Current tea-plucking productivity rates range from 13 to 18 kilograms of green leaves, depending on the estate.

The agreement was signed by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU), which is affiliated to ruling United National Party government, and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC), a coalition of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party and the Stalinist Communist Party. The National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) and the Up Country People’s Front (UPF) have agreed to support the deal.

The NUW, DWC and UPF are partners in the ruling coalition of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and their leaders have ministerial positions in the government. The CWC has for decades been partners with successive Sri Lankan governments and has sought to enter the present administration.

Asked about the unions’ support for increased productivity, CWC president Muthu Sivalingam told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the rates could only be lifted with the consent of union branch leaders in each estate. In other words, the union will impose the higher targets and suppress all opposition. Some estates in Agarapathana have already lifted the tea-plucking target by around 4 kilos a day in the face of protests by plantation workers.

The plantation companies and the union leadership have been jubilant over the direct involvement of government ministers in preparing the agreement.

W.D.J. Seneviratne, Sri Lanka’s labor and trade union relations minister, told the media that a 1,000-rupee daily wage, or back payments of the current pay rise for the 18-month period since expiry of the previous agreement last year, was not possible because of the crisis in plantation industry. This was agreed by all the unions, he said.

The Plantation Association (PA) issued a statement declaring that the productivity-based wage formula was "an extremely important step." It warned, however, that "the agreement as it stands in its final form is one which still places the tea industry in serious jeopardy" and claimed the deal was "unsustainable" without productivity increases.

This means that the PA will push productivity to even higher levels, demand more job cuts and attempt to destroy the meagre welfare benefits previously won by estate workers.

Since March 2015, the PA has demanded the introduction of a "revenue sharing system." Under this regime workers' families would be assigned to maintain 1,000–1,200 tea bushes and paid a share of the earnings, according to the amount of tea plucked. This retrogressive system would reduce workers to the status of poor share croppers.

Sri Lanka and all other tea- and rubber-producing countries are confronting shrinking markets and ongoing falls in commodity prices. Since 2014 Sri Lanka's tea export portion of the world market has dropped from 23 to 17 percent. Declining oil prices, escalating military conflict in the Middle East and intense competition between Sri Lanka and other tea-producing countries, including Kenya and India, have contributed to these falls.

Many estate workers who spoke with WSWS reporters angrily condemned the unions and the government and rejected the new wage deal.

A CWC member and worker from Deeside estate, Maskeliya said: "All the unions have betrayed us. This morning I presented a letter demanding my subscription to the union be stopped. There is no point of giving money to the unions which are working with the companies against us." He said that many workers at his estate would do the same in coming days and described his experience with the unions as terrible. "We want to proceed with our demands but, as you said, we need a new organisation instead of the unions to fight for our demands."

A female worker from Glenugie Estate and a CWC member said that union should have asked the workers before they signed the agreement. "They didn't do it and agreed to 730-rupee wage without our consent."

CWC leaders had been in successive Sri Lankan governments, she said, but they did nothing to benefit the workers. "The companies, government and trade unions conspired against us and are going to put a massive workload on our backs for a pittance. All the successive governments are responsible for this disaster."

She accused the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government of ignoring workers' wage demand and said that the annual Deepavali Festival advance given to workers this year was considered as a loan with interest payments. "We voted for [the new government], as the unions urged us claiming that it would bring a better future"

The government, plantation companies and the unions are attempting to overcome the deepening financial crisis in the plantation industry by stepping up the exploitation of estate workers whose living conditions have drastically deteriorated in recent years. These attacks are part of austerity measures being implemented by Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government under dictates of International Monetary Fund.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained throughout the dispute, plantation workers must break from the unions and establish action committees in every estate to defend their wages, jobs, living standards and basic rights.

This struggle requires a turn to other workers now coming under attack and the fight for a workers' and peasants' government on a socialist program to place big estates and key industries under the democratic control of the working class. This requires the building of a revolutionary leadership. Workers in several estates have voiced their support for establishing action committees on the basis of this program. We urge them to study the SEP's policies and its analysis of the plantation dispute and join its ranks.