

Sri Lanka: Deeside plantation workers form action committee

Our correspondents
4 November 2016

Deeside workers in the Glenugie estate at Maskeliya formed an action committee on October 26 to take forward their fight, along with plantation workers throughout Sri Lanka, for a daily wage of 1,000 rupees.

The Deeside workers took this move after the trade unions signed a collective agreement with employers for a daily wage of 730 rupees (\$US5), tied to productivity. Their move to take up an independent struggle is a critical step forward not only for plantation workers, but every section of the working class.

Plantation workers, one of the most oppressed layers of workers in Sri Lanka, have been in a continuous battle in the recent years against attacks on their wages, jobs and working conditions. In particular, workers have opposed every measure by estate companies to increase their workloads because of the contraction in the tea market created by world economic and geo-political tensions.

A powerful opposition toward trade union betrayals has been growing among workers, who have witnessed the unions acting as industrial police for the ruthless exploitative plans of employers.

As with previous sellout deals, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) and Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC) signed the new collective agreement. The National Workers Union (NUW), Up-country People's Front (UPF) and Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) declared their support for the agreement. While the NUW, DWC, UPF and LJEWU are partners of the present government, the CWC and JPTUC backed previous administrations.

During the past 18 months, since the previous collective agreement expired, the union leaders have engaged in discussions, behind the back of workers, with estate companies and the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. That was why strikes and protests erupted on September 26,

outside the control of the unions.

A critical role in developing the understanding of the need for new forms of working class organisation was played by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and *World Socialist Web Site*. The SEP's statement, "Sri Lankan plantation struggle: Build action committees, fight for socialist policies," issued at the outset of the wage struggle, found a wide hearing among workers.

The SEP explained that the opposition which erupted after the collective agreement was signed should not be limited to breaking with the trade unions. It urged workers to build new organisations, totally independent of the unions, to take the fight into workers' own hands.

The action committee was formed after several rounds of discussions between SEP members and a group of Deeside workers. The discussions clarified the perspective upon which action committees should be based, as a new democratic form of organisation, built in opposition to the obsolete and reactionary trade unions, which have historically degenerated.

M. Thevarajah, an SEP political committee member, was unanimously elected as the president of the committee, while Deeside workers themselves were elected as secretary and other committee leaders.

As a result of subsequent discussion, an appeal—reprinted below—was drafted, and unanimously adopted, addressed to all plantation workers.

Workers still do not know the complete content of the new agreement signed by the unions with the companies, but the employers and the government are boasting that it is a major victory for them, because it is based on driving up productivity.

The criminal character of the agreement and the necessity for action committees to defeat the attacks are increasingly being revealed. A day after the agreement was signed on October 18, employers started speedups.

Last week, the plucking target for tea leaves was

increased from 16 to 18 kilograms in the Henfold estate at Agarapathana. Its Agra division target was raised from 16 to 22 kilograms. When male workers in Deeside came to work on October 22, the employers refused to give them work.

According to the agreement, targets can be increased in any estate with the consent of union leaders and they will undoubtedly assist the employers to do so.

The economic statement made to parliament by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe on October 27 makes it clear that these attacks stem from the policies of the government itself. He said Sri Lanka's agricultural exports have dropped, due to lower tea and rubber prices, and that some estates "do not function well."

Wickremesinghe said regional estates would be restructured by introducing "efficient" entrepreneurship methods and allowing inflows of new capital. This means that estates that "do not function well" should be either closed or handed over to "efficient entrepreneurs."

It is clear that the government is preparing an all-out assault on jobs, wages and working conditions, with the full backing of the union bureaucracies.

Like Deeside workers, workers in every estate should form action committees, based on socialist policies, to fight against these plans to wipe out the jobs of thousands of workers and impose speedups.

The following initial statement was issued by the Deeside workers action committee on October 26:

An appeal for the fighting workers

Our struggle from September 26 demanding a 1,000-rupee daily wage is at the crossroads with the signing of the new collective agreement agreeing to dire wage formulas tied to productivity.

None of us know the true content of the so-called collective agreement signed by union leaders with the employers. This agreement is a result of a secret conspiracy by the estate management, government and unions.

According to information leaked through the media, the daily wage of a worker will increase only by 110 rupees. Basic salaries will be increased up to 500 from 450 rupees. The payment according to tea price stagnates at 30 rupees and the attendance allowance is decreased from

140 to 60 rupees. In order to get that amount, a worker has to work at least 25 days a month.

A productivity incentive of 140 rupees has been newly introduced. This can be claimed only if the estate's plucking targets are achieved. Though the targets from one estate to another are different, they can be upped with the agreement of union leaders.

Compared to the labour extracted under old wage system, this is a slashing of wages, not an increase.

All plantation workers should vehemently reject this wage deal. We should break with unions not just by rejecting and denouncing the union bureaucracy who signed the deal or supported it but take the struggle for a decent wage and other necessities into our own hands.

We are happy to announce that, as workers in Deeside estate in Maskeliya, we have formed an action committee to carry our struggle forward.

In order to win our wage demand through the action committee, we should have a perspective and a program. We need a political perspective aiming at defeating the program of unions, employers and the government. It is required to discuss and adopt this program in the action committee. We hope to discuss the program presented in the statement of the Socialist Equality Party.

Our action committee is completely independent from the trade unions. Its representatives are elected through the democratic votes of workers. Our demands and methods of struggle are decided through democratic discussion within the committee.

We call on the workers in the Deeside division of Glenugie estate to join with our action committee. We also appeal to all the worker comrades in the estates to form action committees.

Our aim is to carry our struggle forward through a central committee uniting all the action committees.

Victory to the struggle of plantation workers!

Workers' Action Committee

Deeside Estate,

Maskeliya

26 October 2016



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