Sri Lankan unions agree to impose share-cropper system on plantation workers

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Through a recently-signed agreement, the trade unions have undertaken to prepare over the next two years to reduce plantation workers to a status akin to share-croppers.

This is a fundamental attack on a major section of the Sri Lankan working class, numbering more than 200,000, that will take away basic rights won in decades of struggles.

The plantation unions signed the new agreement on October 18, despite protests by tens of thousands of workers for nearly one month demanding a 1,000-rupee daily wage—a 380-rupee increase. The workers also opposed any increases in workloads.

The details of the union agreement, published in a gazette, were only available in late November. The deal was signed by the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU), affiliated to the ruling United National Party, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC).

The National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) and the Up Country Peoples Front (UPF), which are partners in the present government, promised to support the implementation of the deal.

According to the agreement, tea and rubber workers' daily wage, with all allowances, will increase to 730 rupees from 620 rupees—a mere 110-rupee increase.

The agreement also provides for increased workloads. One major provision states that companies can increase current "work norms/task in consultation and in agreement with the Union Action Committee at estate level based on past practices."

Though it has not been explained, this term means that union branches in each estate will form official "action committees," to discuss higher workloads with company management before imposing them on workers. These so-called action committees are not elected by workers. They consist of estate-level bureaucrats who will work as industrial police, enforcing the heavier workloads.

The main aim of this arrangement is to prepare the basis for a share-cropper system.

Clause 3 of the document states: "The Unions undertake to support the improvement of productivity of the industry and at estate level by moving to a productivity-linked wage regime based on revenue share/out-grower models etc., through the next agreement. In pursuance of this objective, parties agree to meet and discuss the modalities of implementing the above during the course of this agreement."

This "revenue/share out-grower system" was the proposal that the Planters Association, representing the employers, has insisted upon since the expiry of previous collective agreement in March 2015.

After 18 months, the companies have been able to get the unions' explicit support for this new system of exploitation. In fact, the unions backed the companies' proposal from the outset. Their only concern was to defuse and deflect the opposition of workers with a pittance of a short-term wage increase.

Under the new system, a worker's family will be assigned to maintain 1,000 or more tea bushes. The companies will provide fertiliser and other necessities, such as agrichemicals. After the companies deduct the expense of those supplies, the workers will get an "income share" after the harvest. Workers will lose existing pension schemes, such as the employees' provident fund (EPF) and employees' trust fund (ETF).

The next two years, up to October 2018, will become an interim period, with trade unions and their bogus action committees seeking to impose heavier workloads and transform the present conditions in plantations. Workers will be reduced to individuals looking after plots of lands on behalf of the companies, atomising their organised strength.

The government and the companies are facing sharp declines in prices and world markets for tea and rubber as a result of the deepening world economic slump. In particular, the tea companies are in cut-throat competition with other tea-producing countries like India, Vietnam, Kenya and China. By lowering labour costs and intensifying their exploitation of workers, the companies are desperately seeking to maintain profits.

The government fully supports this assault by the companies. Presenting the government's economic policy statement, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe vowed to "restructure the regional plantation companies by infusing new capital and introducing efficient enterprises."

The government is also seeking to close down "loss-making estates" and convert them into other enterprises. Setting up free trade zones in plantation districts is also on the government's agenda.

These projects and plans are part of the government's efforts to "restructure the economy" in the interests of international finance capital and local big business, along the lines demanded by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

The trade unions are ready to fully collaborate. Clause 7 of the collective agreement declares that the unions and companies "agree to co-operate and commit themselves in improving the efficiency and productivity of the estates and encourage more dialogue and settlement of operational issues at estate level in harmony."

The unions' commitment is to "improve the efficiency and productivity of the estates." They will act to suppress workers, in the name of "estate level harmony."

Once the agreement was signed, the companies started increasing workloads. Workers at Deeside, Balmoral, Agarapathana and Fordyce in the Nuwara-Eliya district stopped work and protested over a two-kilogram hike in the daily plucking norms.

The unions also started their industrial police work in the new spirit, opposing these protests and enabling companies to implement the new targets.

Throughout the dispute, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned workers that the unions, the companies and the government were conspiring to place the burden of the plantation industry crisis onto the backs of workers. The warning has proven correct.

The growing hostility of plantation workers toward the unions signals a developing rebellion against the unions. This, however, is not enough.

Workers must oppose the retrogressive "revenue share/out grower" system that will pave the way for taking back workers' rights and dissolving their organised strength. By proposing this scheme, the companies and the government have shown the depth of the crisis of the world capitalist system based on the extraction of profits.

Workers must prepare to fight these attacks. They need job security, decent monthly wages, pension schemes, proper housing, medical benefits and good education facilities.

This struggle requires workers consciously breaking from the trade unions, which have become the police for big business. The unions have pledged to form "action committees" to serve the interests of the companies.

In opposition to these bodies, workers must build their own action committees, elected democratically and totally independent of the unions, to fight for their rights. A group of workers in the Deeside estate in Upcot of Hatton has taken the initiative to form such a committee. The SEP urges all workers to follow this lead.

To fight the government-backed offensive of the companies, plantation workers' action committees need to turn to other sections of the working class who are facing similar assaults and fight for socialist policies to place the major industries and plantations under the democratic control of workers.

Such a program can be implemented only by establishing a workers' and peasants' government. The task at hand is to unite all sections of the working class, independently of every faction of the bourgeoisie, to fight for this policy. Only the SEP advances this program.

We urge workers and youth to attend the public meeting organised by the SEP and Deeside Action Committee at the Hindu Cultural Hall in Upcot on Sunday December 18 at 2 p.m.

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