

Sri Lankan plantation workers demonstrate for higher wages

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Thousands of tea plantation workers took to the streets of Talawakelle town in the tea growing central highlands of Sri Lanka on 23 September to demand a wage increase. Workers from almost all the plantations in the area participated in the protest that brought Talawakelle town to a halt. Small business owners shut down their shops in support of the workers.

Workers chanted slogans denouncing the collective agreement as a “slave pact” and made clear that their salaries are grossly inadequate. They said that they do not earn enough to survive on or provide adequate daily meals for their families, let alone the cost of educating their children.

A public rally was held at the Talawakelle Urban Council playground following the demonstration. It was chaired by National Union of Workers (NUW) president P. Digambaram, who is also a government cabinet minister.

The protest was organised by seven unions, including the NUW, Upcountry People’s Front (UPF) and the Democratic People’s Front (DPF). UPF leader V. Radhakrishnan and DPF leader Mano Ganeshan are also government ministers.

S. Sritharan, a member of parliament for the Tamil National Alliance, was invited to address the protest in an attempt to bolster the unions. Echoing union officials, he told the meeting that the Sri Lankan president and prime minister had to intervene to secure a reasonable outcome for plantation workers.

The demonstration was organized, not to fight for decent pay for plantation employees, but to deflect workers’ rising anger over their poverty-level wages amid rising costs of living and declining social conditions.

Union officials attempted to sow illusions that the estate companies and the government could be persuaded to give concessions. Digambaram, Radhakrishnan and Mano Ganeshan, however, are ministers in the current

government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and endorse its International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity program.

The plantation workers two-year collective agreement (CA) is about to expire in October. The main plantation unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Lanka Eksath Jathika Kamkaru Sangamaya (LEJWU) and the Joint Committee of Plantation Trade Union (JPTUC)—have begun closed-door discussions with the plantation companies. Two-year collective agreements between the plantation companies and the unions have been the practice since 1992.

While the seven unions that organised last Sunday’s protest are usually not involved in the negotiations they always endorse the other plantation unions’ secret deals with the companies. This time these unions are calling for a so-called “reasonable” wage rise in order to contain and dissipate workers’ demands for a 1,000-rupee daily wage—a 100 percent increase on the current 500 rupees per day. The exchange rate is 167 rupees to the US dollar at present, an almost 9 percent devaluation since the beginning of the year.

Over the last three months, several protests have erupted against the plantation companies, the government and in defiance of the unions. Last month nearly, 2,000 workers from Agrapathana, which is about 15 km from Talawakelle, walked out in solidarity with two workers from the Waverly and Glasgow estates who began a hunger strike demanding 1,000 rupee daily wage.

The walkout was derailed by a local UPF leader who falsely claimed he would take up the workers’ demand. It was followed by another protest at the Tillyrie Estate, Dickoya, and Torrington Estate, Agrapathana, against rising living costs.

During last Sunday’s demonstration, Digambaram declared: “[I]f plantation companies refuse to give a reasonable wage increase we will chase away the

companies and hand over the estate to workers.” UPF leader Radhakrishnan said: “The government must intervene to solve plantation workers’ wage issue like President Sirisena intervened to solve the postal workers’ and rail way workers’ wage claims.”

These are desperate lies by the two union leaders who are desperately trying to maintain their authority over the plantation workers. At the same time, they hold ministerial positions in the government and support all its attacks on workers.

Digambaram’s threat to expropriate the companies if they do not provide reasonable salary increases, is completely hollow. Instead of concessions, some of the plantation companies, have begun implementing the so-called revenue-sharing system with union support, including from Digambaram’s NUW.

Under this retrogressive system workers and their families are allocated about 1,000 tea bushes to tend. They have to supply all harvests to the company factory and are then given their “share” after the company has taken its profits and deducted the cost of supplying tools, fertilisers and other costs.

Radhakrishnan’s calls for the Sri Lanka president to intervene is an attempt to blind plantation workers to the fact that his government has already launched vicious police attacks on postal and railway strikers. In those cases, the unions shut down the strike following worthless promises from Sirisena that he would “consider” workers’ claims.

Behind this rhetoric, the plantation unions are preparing the ground for similar attacks and will eventually support the widespread imposition of the revenue-sharing system to boost company profits and destroy workers’ limited rights and welfare.

CWC leader Muthu Sivalingam, the main union involved in the current CA discussions, openly denounced the demonstrating workers, declaring: “Protests and struggles can’t increase the wages. We have to be involved in discussion on how to develop the plantation industry, which will eventually increase wages.”

During last month’s collective agreement discussions, the companies refused point blank to offer any wage rise and instead called on the unions to “defend the tea industry.” Muthu Sivalingam’s statement makes clear that the unions are collaborating with the companies against the plantation workers.

During last Sunday’s protest, M. Yoheswaran, a plantation worker from Edinburgh estate, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that a 1,000-rupee daily wage would

not even cover his daily expenses.

“A kilogram of rice and flour is 100 rupees each. A coconut is 70 or 80 rupees and gas and sugar prices have also been increased recently but the unions are only asking for a ‘reasonable’ wage rise,” he said.

“The unions are involved in secret discussions with the companies and refuse to tell us what they are demanding. They will cheat us again, like they did last time. The trade unions are not ready to fight for our demands but just striving for their own privileges.”

He also voiced his concern about revenue-sharing. “I think the scheme is dangerous for the workers. We will lose EPF, ETF [pension fund systems] and other welfare facilities,” he said and warned that whole families, including children, will have to cultivate. “This would severely affect our children’s education. We have to somehow defeat this system.”

WSWS reporters explained that the plantation workers had to take the struggle for a decent wage into their own hands by building action committees, independent of unions, and to fight for workers’ control of the big plantations as part of a broader fight for a socialist program and a workers’ and peasants’ government.

Overhearing this discussion, R. Nagenthiran, another worker from the same estate, said: “We don’t believe that these union leaders can fight for our rights while being government ministers. They are dividing the workers in order to defend their privileges. This is the first time someone talked about action committees with us. We’d like to invite you to our estate for further discussion on this.”

S. Ravichandran from Henfold estate in Agrapathana said: “We want a wage increase, that’s why we are participating in this demonstration, but we have no faith in union leaders. Next week we will organise a demonstration in our estate to continue this protest.”



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