

Thousands of youth demonstrate in Sri Lanka to support plantation workers' wage struggle

Our correspondents
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About 5,000 young workers gathered at Galle Face Green in central Colombo on Wednesday for a day-long protest supporting a plantation workers' campaign for a 1,000-rupee (about \$US6) daily wage.

Many young men and women working in Colombo and other parts of the country participated in the protest, shouting slogans until noon. They demanded a resolution to the wage demand before October 31.

A new collective agreement is due to be signed between the trade unions and the Sri Lanka Employers Federation by that date. Before previous agreements, the unions employed militant rhetoric to divert workers' anger but ultimately imposed meagre wage increases tied to increasing workloads. This time, they are engaged in backroom discussions with companies.

When protestors started marching toward the nearby Presidential Secretariat, police erected road blocks to stop them. Fully-armed riot police with teargas, batons and water cannon trucks were initially kept on standby.

Protesters were informed by a Presidential Secretariat official that they should send some representatives the next morning to meet higher officials. Protesters decided to wait at the site until then.

At about 8 p.m., police suddenly unleashed violence on the peaceful protest, attacking the youth with batons and chasing them away.

Thousands of plantation workers are holding daily protests, demanding the doubling of their current wage of 500 rupees. The demonstrations were called by the National Union of Workers (NUW), led by a government minister, P. Digambaram, which has deliberately called limited protests on a staggered basis, fearing a major struggle could erupt.

In response to Wednesday's protest, the Planters Association held a press conference in Colombo to reject the workers' demand. Association chairman Sunil Poholiyadde said any such increase would result in the

collapse of the plantation industry. He insisted that only a 20 percent, or 100-rupee, wage increase was possible.

Poholiyadde claimed that with various allowances, workers could reach 1,000 rupees. However, workers find it difficult to reach the related productivity and attendance requirements.

The Colombo protest marks a new stage of development in the class struggle, as part of an international resurgence of the working class. Adopting the name "Group 24," youth used social media to organise the campaign, saying they wanted to give voice to the justified demand of the plantation workers and gather the support among workers in the country and internationally. This is the first time that Sri Lankan workers have conducted such a campaign.

Representing the group, a young medical officer, Prasad Kumar, told WSWs reporters: "Plantation workers have hugely contributed to the economy for over 200 years since British rule, and for 70 years since the country's independence. However, like the imperialist rulers, the Sri Lankan rulers too have neglected them. They get only 500 rupees a day ... How can they cope with 500 rupees as cost of living is sky rocketing?"

Kumar explained that the group did not limit the protest to plantation-origin youth but invited all those who backed the wage demand. Accordingly, youth from the north, and Sinhalese youth from the south were among the participants. He warned: "Bourgeois politicians are seeking to grab this kind of opportunity for their advantage. Some political parties from the plantations have come here to derail the protest."

Among the protestors were associates of the NUW and the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC)—another plantation-based union, led by ex-government minister Arumugam Thondaman and a former parliamentarian Shri Renga who has now lined up with Thondaman.

Young men and women who spoke to the WSWs voiced opposition to the trade unions.

Yoga, a Colombo textile worker, said: “Unions say one thing to workers and discuss another thing with the companies. They come to workers and tell them ‘as the factories are on the verge of collapse, you better accept the wage offer and return to work.’ Workers are going down the precipice. That is why many in our generation have abandoned toiling in the estates and come to Colombo. Even working here, we are just managing to survive.”

A young woman from an estate at Maskeliya, currently working at Cargill’s Food City as a salesgirl, said her parents had sent her to school from the estate in difficult conditions. “We had to walk six kilometres to school. So we need definitely a 1,000-rupee salary. I finished my advanced level at school but I’m working as a salesgirl in Cargill’s to help my parents to educate my brothers.

“In Cargill’s we face very difficult working conditions. We come to the shop at 7 in the morning and start work at 8, continuing until 5 in the evening. Sometimes we work two shifts continuously.”

Prabu from Bibila said no one in his family worked in the estates but their origins were in the plantations. “So I came here to support the wage campaign. I work at a construction site in very difficult conditions and receive 1,500 rupees a day. After sending some money to my family, it is not enough to live on.”

Prabu said there were no basic facilities for plantation workers, including decent housing. “The unions boast they build homes for estate workers, but they build a few houses without adequate water supply or decent toilets.” He added: “I agree with you about building a society with social equality. It would open a huge opportunity. We would like to discuss these issues.”

Because the Group 24 provided no political perspective, pro-capitalist organisations, particularly one led by Shri Renga, worked to divert a section of protestors to appeal to President Maithripala Sirisena’s government.

During the past several months, the trade unions have betrayed struggles involving postal, railway and waterboard workers, urging them to accept Sirisena’s false promises. Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe promised a 1,000-rupee wage for plantation workers when they campaigned to come to power, but reneged on the pledge. Nevertheless, the unions have channelled workers behind this pro-imperialist government, which is implementing the austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

Organisers of the protest said they planned to spread the

message about the wage struggle to other cities. It is a positive initiative on the part of these youth to make workers conscious of the situation and the anger felt toward the government, the companies and the trade unions that have become their direct agencies. However, this is not politically adequate to win the struggle of plantation or other workers.

In its protest invitation, the group said: “No to politics or political organisations.” Organisers tried to justify this by saying they meant to bar establishment parties and trade unions. However, a prohibition on politics would be an obstacle to politically exposing those parties and unions, and to building a genuine working class leadership. The working class needs a socialist political perspective.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members distributed a leaflet in Sinhala and Tamil languages, raising the necessity of building a revolutionary party among workers and youth.

Pointing to the underlying economic, political and social crisis, the leaflet explained that the working class and poor could not achieve their democratic and social rights within the capitalist system. Specifically addressing plantation workers, the statement called for the establishment of action committees in every estate, elected by workers democratically, totally independent of the trade unions and bourgeois parties.

“These committees must discuss and decide the decent wage that workers should fight for. They must call a conference of workers’ delegates to call for a united struggle of plantation and other sectors. It is necessary to fight for the unity of the international working class in this struggle.

“Above all, this is a political struggle. The working class, including plantation workers, can realise their rights only under a workers’ and peasants’ government that will nationalise the large estates, banks and big companies under workers’ control as part of the struggle for international socialism.”



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