The international significance of the Sri Lankan plantation workers' strike

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17 December 2018

The recent indefinite strike by tens of thousands of Sri Lankan plantation workers holds vital political lessons for the working class internationally.

Workers in the tea and rubber estates of Sri Lanka are one of the most oppressed layers of the island's working class. A groundswell of hostility and opposition compelled the main trade union, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), to call strike action from December 4 to demand a doubling of the daily wage from 500 to 1,000 rupees, or just $US5.60.

The strike by plantation workers in Sri Lanka is part of an accelerating resurgence of the class struggle on the island, in South Asia and internationally. As plantation workers were holding protests in the estate areas of central Sri Lanka, the "yellow vest" protests were taking place in the streets of Paris and other cities against the fuel tax and declining living standards.

In India, autoworkers have recently taken strike action in Tamil Nadu. In Canada and the US, following widespread strikes by teachers earlier this year, there is an increasingly militant mood among autoworkers after GM announced the plant closures and the destruction of nearly 15,000 jobs.

This rapidly developing upsurge of workers internationally is a striking confirmation of the analysis made by International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) at the very beginning of the year which anticipated such a movement.

As has so often been the case in the twentieth century, events on the small island of Sri Lanka off the southern tip of India are proving once again to be a harbinger of economic, political and social processes taking place around the world. The political lessons from the strike by plantation workers are directly relevant to the struggles of workers internationally.

As in France and the US, the Sri Lankan plantation struggle emerged in a rebellion against the trade unions. The CWC only called the strike because it faced the prospect of wild cat strikes by workers who simply cannot survive on the current wages. When the remaining unions—the National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic People's Front (DPF) and the Upcountry People's Front (UPF)—opposed the strike, their members ignored the directives and stopped work anyway.

The CWC had not the slightest intention of prosecuting a militant political and industrial struggle against the plantation companies, which were adamantly opposed to any concessions to workers, or the government. Time and again the CWC has acted as an industrial police force against workers, echoing the cry of these highly profitable corporations that they cannot afford a pay rise as the Sri Lankan tea industry must be "internationally competitive."

The widespread distrust and contempt among plantation workers towards the unions has been building for decades following one betrayal after another. However, in the midst of the strike, workers at the Abbotsleigh Estate in Hatton took a bold new step and formed an action committee independent of the unions, under the political guidance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI.

On December 7, Abbotsleigh workers staged their own protest and marched for three hours to the town of Hatton. They chanted slogans and carried placards calling for a 40,000-rupee monthly wage, not daily wages, and called on their fellow workers to also build independent action committees. The marchers also turned to the working class internationally, declaring: "Immediately release Maruti-Suzuki workers

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imprisoned in India!" and "Support General Motors workers fighting against plant closures!"

Their calls to fight for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies stood in direct opposition to the CWC and other plantation unions, which are tied to the two major capitalist parties on the island—the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

The plantation strike took place amid an immense political crisis of rule in Colombo after President Sirisena unconstitutionally sacked UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe on October 26 and installed former President Mahinda Rajapakse from the SLFP as prime minister. Fear of the mounting movement of the working class on the island was a significant factor in the reappointment of Wickremesinghe yesterday after weeks of bitter factional disputes further discredited the threadbare façade of parliamentary democracy (see: "Sri Lankan president reinstates sacked prime minister ").

The same fear drove the CWC to call off the strike on December 12, after closed door talks with President Maithripala Sirisena and a vague promise that he would resolve the wage dispute. This abject and cynical betrayal provoked an eruption of angry protests throughout the plantation districts. After two days, workers returned to work, under protest, but nevertheless the strike was over.

What was lacking was not the determination to fight, which plantation workers had demonstrated in abundance, but the organisational means to prosecute the struggle, and above all, a political perspective with which to fight the lies and subterfuges of the trade unions and ruling class parties, and the capitalist system that they all defend. In other words, workers have to take up a revolutionary struggle on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. There is no other way to defend even the most basic necessities of life. All that the plantation workers were demanding was $5.60 a day.

That is the political significance of the turn by the Abbotsleigh workers to the SEP and the formation of an independent action committee. In the midst of the plantation strike, auto workers in the US attended an emergency meeting in Detroit on December 9 called by the *WSWS Autoworkers Newsletter* and the US SEP. They resolved unanimously to form rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the unions, as well as a broader steering committee, to fight against plant closures, layoffs and other attacks on the working class.

Both developments signal that workers are beginning to turn to revolutionary politics and forms of organisation and to a socialist and internationalist perspective. These important initiatives must be developed and expanded in Sri Lanka, the US and around the world, including in France where the *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* (PES), the French section of the ICFI, is calling on "yellow vest" protesters to form committees of action in the working class.

At the Detroit meeting, an auto worker asked whether the rank-and-file committees "would be permitted to use the WSWS as a communicating tool, as a voice and unique educator? And will the Socialist Equality Party provide the leadership so that we can go on and function on a strategic level?" The answer was an emphatic "Yes."

The question and the answer highlight the critical role of revolutionary leadership and the urgent necessity of developing the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International in every country to unify the emerging struggles of the working class.

The response of the ruling class to the deepening crisis of capitalism is trade and war, crushing austerity measures and a turn to dictatorial forms of rule. The reply of the international working class must be to intensify the fight for a socialist alternative. We urge workers to join and build the ICFI, both its existing sections and new sections elsewhere, as the necessary leadership to lead this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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