

Sri Lankan plantation union discussing sellout deal with companies

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Recent media reports indicate that Sri Lankan plantation unions are preparing to drop workers' demands for a 100 percent daily wage increase and impose a new collective agreement as part of a backroom deal with companies.

Citing a senior Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC) official, the *Daily FT* reported on December 31 that the plantation unions have shown their "willingness for some flexibility to consider" three offers made by plantation companies. The official added: "This is a very positive reaction from them after four months of discussions."

The EFC official did not provide any details on the three offers or reveal how the unions had shown "flexibility." However, he told the newspaper that the EFC had "categorically" stated that "it was not feasible for the plantation companies to commit to a 1,000-rupee basic wage."

Tens of thousands of plantation workers, who held protests and demonstrations when the last two-year agreement expired in October, began an indefinite national strike on December 4 to demand that their current 500-rupee (\$US2.80) daily wage be doubled to 1,000 rupees.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which called the walkout in an attempt to dissipate workers' determination to fight, ended all industrial action within a week, claiming that President Maithripala Sirisena had promised to discuss the wage demands with the companies. Thousands of workers remained on strike for another two days in defiance of the union's shutdown (see: "Sri Lankan plantation workers end strike action under protest").

The CWC leadership, along with the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union (LJEWU) and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC), are currently

in discussions with the EFC.

From the outset, the plantation companies insisted that they would increase the basic daily wage by just 20 percent, with improvements in various allowances, which they claim would enable workers to earn 940 rupees per day. The allowances include, "attendance and productivity incentives and a price share supplement." However, the majority of plantation workers would not meet the targets and thus would not receive the allowances.

The unnamed senior official also told the *Daily FT* that the EFC's "top priority" was to conclude "the collective agreement negotiations." In fact, the top priority of the companies is not to resolve the wage issue but to ensure the unions commit to imposing the "revenue share scheme." This would abolish the current "outdated" wage system, transform workers into sharecroppers and scrap existing meager benefits such as the Employees' Provident Fund.

While the plantation unions agreed to support the scheme in the last collective agreement, the companies now want the unions fully involved as an industrial police force to ruthlessly impose this exploitative system.

At last month's annual general meeting of the Ceylon Planters Association (CPA), chairman Roshan Rajadurai declared: "The current model of employment is over 150 years old ... The planters' association is advocating a model of revenue sharing where the employees are encouraged and motivated to work hard and earn more than the amount they desire now."

Under the scheme, tea bushes are allocated to a worker's family to maintain and harvest. They receive a portion of the income after the company's costs and profits have been deducted.

Plantation workers have rejected this system in

estates where it has been implemented in recent years. At the Abbotsleigh estate, workers are employed directly by the company until 2 p.m. each day and then forced to tend the tea bushes assigned to them. This means that whole families have had to work to maintain “their” tea bushes, without any real increase in their income.

With the backing of the government and police, the plantation companies are trying to crush all working-class opposition. Two weeks ago, Suppaiah Balasubramaniam, a local CWC branch leader of the St Ley’s division of Dickoya’s Annfield estate, was accused by estate management of “unruly behaviour” and, along with three other workers, summoned to the Dickoya police station. The so-called unruly behaviour consisted of organising protests during the national strike.

Plantation Industries Minister Navin Dissanayake has pledged to support an “equitable solution” to workers’ wage demands. But his “equitable solution” is to implement all the proposals being demanded by the companies.

P. Sundaralingam, leader of the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee, told the WSWs yesterday that the abandonment of the 1,000-rupee wage demand was “a great betrayal of the workers’ struggle.” He also condemned the witch hunt of workers at Annfield estate and warned that the unions’ perfidy created the conditions for the workers to be victimised.

The Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action committee was formed under the guidance of Socialist Equality Party during the recent strike. Abbotsleigh workers, who have suffered many bitter experiences as a result of union betrayals, have begun to understand the necessity of an independent political movement of workers based on socialist policies.

We urge all plantation workers to reject any union-company deal, study the analysis developed by the Socialist Equality Party and politically prepare to resume the fight to win their wage demands and defend their rights.

The trade unions do not represent workers’ interests but defend the capitalist system.

Since the collective agreement system was introduced in 1992, the unions have systematically collaborated with employers in imposing deals that defend the profit interests of the plantation companies.

Nor are CWC’s rivals, such as the National Union of Workers (NUW), the Democratic People’s Front (DPF) and the Up-country People’s Front (UPF), any different. These organisations routinely endorse the collective agreement deals signed by the CWC, the LJEWU and the JPTUC. Workers must break from all these formations and organise their own action committees to fight for their rights.

The outright rejection of estate workers’ legitimate demands and the back-room moves to impose the so-called revenue share system are part of a broader attack on the living conditions of the entire working class. Workers can only defend their rights through the fight for socialist internationalism and for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.



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