

Sri Lankan plantation workers oppose company-union attempts to impose sell-out

Our reporters
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Opposition is growing among Sri Lankan plantation workers to attempts by the major companies and the trade unions to impose a wage agreement aimed at scuttling the campaign for a doubling of their daily pay.

Vadivel Suresh, the general secretary of the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, told a press conference yesterday that the unions would hold backroom talks on January 16 with the Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC), which is representing the plantation companies. The government will also participate, along with officials from the labour and plantation ministries.

Suresh, who is part of the government, as the state minister of plantation industries, indicated that the discussion would lead to a new collective agreement covering plantation workers. Two other union groups, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC), are also taking part in the meeting.

The plantation unions have already signalled their willingness to jettison the demand for a wage rise from 500 rupees to 1,000 rupees a day. Over the past three months, they have sought to suppress a series of strikes and protests by plantation workers that have been supported by youth, estate teachers, small traders and other sections of the working class.

In December, the CWC ended an indefinite nine-day strike of 100,000 plantation workers after claiming that President Maithripala Sirisena had promised to resolve the wage dispute.

Roshan Rajadurai, the EFC's Plantation Services Group chairman, recently reiterated that "the workers' demand cannot be met" amid "the dip in global tea prices." The EFC has proposed a wage increase of just 20 percent, with small attendance and incentive allowances. Many workers, however, cannot reach the targets set for these allowances.

The EFC also is seeking to scrap the wage system and replace it with a so-called revenue share scheme. This would effectively transform workers into sharecroppers, each responsible for a plot of land. They would receive only a portion of the income from the tea bushes allocated to them, after company costs and profits had been deducted.

The companies have made clear that any deal must meet their demands for a stepped-up offensive against plantation workers' rights and conditions. EFC director general Kanishka Weerasinghe told the *Sunday Observer* that the federation was "confident that all parties will be able to reach a solution to the issue soon."

The article added: "There is a silver lining for the long drawn-out battle, as workers have softened their stance and have agreed to reach an agreement on the basic wage" and have "shown interest in reaching an agreement considering offers by companies."

The *Observer's* reference to workers "softening their stance" was disingenuous. In reality, the unions are seeking to impose a sell-out in the face of widespread opposition.

The real sentiments of workers found expression at a meeting yesterday of the Abbotsleigh estate action committee. Its president, P. Suntharalingam, declared: "Our committee will oppose any agreement that goes against our demands."

Suntharalingam said the committee would appeal to all plantation workers for a unified struggle against any union-brokered sellout and to continue the fight for a 100 percent wage increase.

The Abbotsleigh estate action committee was formed last month with the support of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). The SEP had called on plantation workers to establish organisations independent of the unions,

which function as a police force of the government and the major companies. The SEP explained that to go forward, such committees must turn to a political struggle aimed at establishing a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies.

S. Krishnamurthy, a worker at the action committee meeting, said: "It was only by reading the *World Socialist Web Site* that we learnt that the plantation unions secretly are working with the companies to sign an agreement for a revenue-sharing system. The union does not inform us of anything. They are betraying our wage struggle."

Krishnamurthy added that when such a scheme was introduced at his estate, workers "faced a lot of problems." He explained: "Our whole family was compelled to work. There was no relief, even on Sundays. We had to do everything, including cleaning, pruning and plucking. Fertilizers and pesticides were supplied by management and the cost was deducted from our income, so our earnings declined. All the workers decided to return to the previous system."

Ramaiah Ravi, from the Montifiore division, said: "I am a member of the Up-country People's Front but the union does not tell us anything. I will telephone V. Radhakrishnan, who is its leader, and ask him what is really happening. We will have to take action if they implement an agreement betraying workers' demands."

WSWS reporters also visited Panmure estate, near the town of Hatton. Workers there lack the most basic facilities. The road to the estate is completely dilapidated. Private bus services are the only available mode of transportation. Workers explained that they need a 100 percent wage increase just to meet their basic needs.

Velayudam, a 72-year-old retired worker, said: "We get a pipe-borne water supply only every other day for drinking. Our other water necessities are supplied from a nearby lake. There are no proper sanitary facilities.

"I have three children, all of whom are married. My wife, Muniamma, is 70-years-old. Because our children find it difficult to feed us, she has started working at the estate again. Because she is a casual employee, she is only paid 30 rupees per kilo of tea leaves and does not receive any other wage."

In the past, Panmure estate workers could get medicine from the nearby Abbotsleigh estate and they were given a free tea packet each month. Both

allowances have been abolished.

To obtain medicine, Panmure workers now have to travel several kilometres to Dickoya hospital. However, a three-wheeler taxi, costing several hundred rupees for the journey, is unaffordable for them.

Anusha, a young woman at the estate, said she had been hoping to study advanced level bio-technology. She was instead compelled to study arts subjects as her parents could not afford to send her to school in Hatton. Her mother is a nurse at a private hospital and her grandmother a retired plantation worker.

Anusha's mother said her monthly salary is around 15,000 rupees. Her husband drives a three-wheeler taxi. "We have three children and our income is not sufficient to live and pay for their education," she said. "To buy any medicine, we must pay about 600 rupees. We live with huge economic difficulties. My retired mother now goes to work at the estate on a contract basis to earn some income."

S. Balasubramaniam, a CWC branch secretary at the St. Ley's division of Ann Field estate in Dickoya, has been victimised along with several other workers for organising protests during last month's strike.

Balasubramaniam was accused by the plantation's management of obstructing estate work and faces the prospect of the police laying criminal charges against him. CWC leaders have abandoned the workers, thereby facilitating the attacks against them.

Balasubramaniam and several of his colleagues read the WSWS article "Sri Lankan plantation union discussing sellout deal with companies" last week. He said: "We oppose such a deal. We went on strike to increase our wage but we didn't get anything because all the unions abandoned our struggle. Now we have been victimised to intimidate workers. As you say, trade unions don't fight for our rights." He expressed support for the formation of action committees.



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