

The way forward to win wages and social rights

Workers Action Committee in Sri Lanka calls plantation workers' conference

**The Abbotsleigh Estate Workers Action Committee
12 February 2019**

The following statement calling for a workers' conference was issued by the Workers Action Committee of the Abbotsleigh Estate.

The Abbotsleigh action committee was established in December after the trade unions betrayed a powerful nine-day strike by plantation workers for a 1,000-rupee daily wage. Workers from several other estates have expressed their solidarity with the Abbotsleigh committee and pledged to fight to establish similar committees.

Although the two main plantation unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union—have signed a new collective agreement, which includes a meagre pay rise tied to increased productivity, the government has yet to gazette it in the face ongoing workers' opposition.

The Workers Action Committee of Abbotsleigh Estate, with the support of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, will hold a workers' conference at the Hatton Town Hall on March 17 to discuss "The lessons of the plantation workers struggle and the way forward to win wages and social rights."

We invite workers, youth and progressive intellectuals to attend and take part in this important meeting.

Our recent pay strike involving around 200,000 plantation workers is part of a resurgence of working class struggles internationally against the escalating attacks on social and democratic rights by the capitalist class in every country.

This struggle was conducted in defiance of the trade unions and their political sabotage, and despite threats by employers and the government. We were able to win enthusiastic backing from youth, teachers and small shopkeepers, and from other sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

While plantation workers called for a 100 percent increase in the basic daily wage, the companies and the government completely rejected the demand. The Ceylon Workers

Congress (CWC) and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) betrayed the struggle and on January 28 signed a sellout collective agreement with the companies.

Under the agreement, our basic daily wage has increased, on paper only, by 200 rupees—from 500 to 700 rupees (\$US3.92)—and the price-share supplement allowance was lifted from 30 to 50 rupees. The companies, however, scrapped previously existing daily attendance and productivity allowances of 60 and 140 rupees respectively. This means that overall workers will only receive a daily wage of 750 rupees, a mere 20-rupee increase compared to the previous level.

In addition, under Clause 3 of the new collective agreement, the unions have undertaken to support a "productivity-linked wage regime based on revenue share out-grower models."

In estates where this "revenue share out-grower model" has been implemented, workers cannot earn enough for the barest minimum to live. The system requires the whole family to toil on the land allocated and transforms us into sharecroppers. We will lose our pension funds and other limited social benefits.

The unions have also agreed, without our consent, "to cooperate and commit themselves in improving the efficiency and productivity of estates" and to work for the "settlement of operational issues at estate level in harmony." This means unions will collaborate with the companies to intensify exploitation of workers.

The Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre, National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic People's Front (DPF) and Up-country People's Front (UPF), as well as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled All Ceylon Estate Workers Union have aided and abetted in this agreement.

All these unions were engaged in secret discussions, completely ignoring our democratic rights. The workers should reject their bogus protests against the new agreement and register their strong opposition to their treachery through

organising strikes and protest actions independently.

Now, amid widespread opposition by workers to this agreement, the leaders of NUW, DPF and UPF—P. Digambaram, Mono Ganesan and V. Radhakrishnan respectively, who are also government ministers—issued another bogus promise to seek some redress in talks with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The companies, however, have again stated that they will not increase pay by a single cent beyond what is in the collective agreement.

Deeply concerned about the opposition of workers, the government has postponed formally gazetting the new collective agreement. However, no one should hope that the government or the companies will better the lot of workers.

A new group has emerged called the “1,000 [rupee] Movement” appealing to workers to “pressure the government, the plantations authorities and the trade unions” to grant the wage demand. Why should we waste our time on such futile exercises when the companies and the government have repeatedly rejected our demands? The only purpose is to prevent us from conducting a real fight for our rights.

The attack on plantation workers is a part of an agenda of austerity being imposed by capitalist governments in every country. The capitalist class is determined to unload the burden of the worsening global economic crisis onto the backs of workers.

The plantation companies and the government say that our wage and social benefits cannot be increased because the industry cannot afford to pay. We say, the workers are not responsible for the crisis of profit system. We, the workers are the producers of wealth, not the plantation owners.

Estate workers are deprived of adequate basic facilities like housing, health and education. Like our fellow estate workers in other countries, such as Kenya, India and China, we are being exploited by a chain of international plantation and financial corporations.

We must reject the paltry pay increase and demands for speed-up. We have the right to a decent monthly wage with fully paid leave, medical benefits and a proper pension scheme. It is time to end the slave-labour conditions to which estate workers have been subjected for more than 150 years.

In order to wage a successful fight, we must draw necessary lessons from our own past and present struggles, as well as those of our international class brothers and sisters.

About 70,000 workers at auto parts factories in Matamoros in Mexico, across the border from the US, have been fighting for weeks and are demanding 20 percent wage hike. General Motors workers in US and Canada are waging a struggle against the elimination of thousands of jobs. In

France, workers, youth and sympathising small-business people are engaged in the “yellow vest” movement to demand social equality, wage increases, the elimination of the privileges of the super-rich and the ouster of the country’s president. Last month tens of millions of public sector workers in India and 700,000 teachers and public workers in Tamil Nadu took strike action to demand better wages and conditions.

These struggles demonstrate the enormous strength of the international working class and the potential for a unified fight against the common enemy, the capitalist system.

We established the Workers Action Committee of the Abbotsleigh Estate after our own bitter experiences with the plantation unions. They have sided not with the workers, but with the companies, the government and police. In our current wage struggle, the treachery of the unions has been very obvious.

We had the guidance of Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which is the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. Its sister parties in other countries are also fighting to mobilise workers independently of all capitalist parties and the trade unions on the basis of a program of socialist policies.

The SEP is campaigning among all sections of workers in Sri Lanka to build action committees, democratically elected by the workers. The planned conference will democratically discuss how to coordinate these committees through a political perspective to achieve our urgent democratic and social demands.

We believe that the socialist program proposed by the SEP is essential for all workers. The large estates, banks and big companies must be brought under the democratic control of the working class so as to organise production and distribution, not for the benefit of a profit-hungry few, but to meet the pressing needs of the vast majority of working people.

To implement such a perspective, the working class must fight to establish a workers’ and peasants’ government as part of the broader fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

Details:

Conference date: Sunday, March 17, 10am

Venue: Hatton Town Hall



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact