

How giant tea companies exploit Kenyan plantation workers

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This writer visited Kenyan tea estates earlier this year and witnessed first-hand the ruthless regime maintained by multinational companies. Sri Lankan and Indian plantation companies often cite Kenya to demand similar conditions in order to compete in the world tea market.

Lucrative Kenyan tea plantations are owned by British corporate giants, including Unilever and James Finlay. As in other former colonial countries, tea plantation companies started in Kenya under British rule.

However, major British firms, such as Brooke Bond and Lipton, which initially operated in Sri Lanka, shifted to Kenya in the early 1970s after the Colombo government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike “nationalised” tea estates under state control. Today Kenya is the world’s largest tea exporter, contributing 25 percent of black tea exports.

Kenya was a British colony until 1963. Britain brutally suppressed the anti-colonial Mau Mau uprising from 1952 to 1960. According to the Kenya Human Rights Commission, 90,000 Kenyans were killed, many more were maimed and hundreds of thousands were held in concentration camps.

While Kenya’s first leader Jomo Kenyatta pursued nationalist policies, foreign investment dominated the economy. Kenyatta’s son, President Uhuru Kenyatta, remains in power, manipulating elections and suppressing workers’ struggles. Under the banner of fighting “terrorism,” he is running a police state.

During British rule, workers were brought to the Kenyan plantations from oppressed tribes in Kenya, as well as from Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. Workers were subjected to iron discipline, with companies even conducting canings.

Today the brutality continues. Child labour, along

with casual labour without job security and underpayment are prevalent.

A study published in India titled “Production and Export of Value Added Tea in India and its Global Competitiveness” (*Economic Affairs*, Vol. 62, December 2017) noted that the “labour productivity in kilograms per man was the highest in Kenya followed by India,” partly due to the use of “domestic labour” and “quality plucking.”

“Domestic labour” refers to seasonal workers who are employed from a pool of labour in the plantation region, only during the peak season. Once laid off, seasonal workers must quit the plantations and look for other employment. “Quality plucking” includes mechanised harvesting methods, with higher targets than manual plucking.

Permanent workers in Unilever’s Kericho county plantation can make 515 Kenyan shillings (\$US5.15) a day, barely sufficient for daily expenses. A very basic meal costs around 100 shillings and a fast food restaurant meal is well over 500 shillings. Manual plucking workers get 16 shillings per kilo of plucked and sorted tea. To take home 515 shillings, she or he will have to pluck a back-breaking average of 32 kilos.

According to the 2016 report of True Price, a non-governmental organisation, titled *The True Price of Tea from Kenya*, a permanent plantation worker’s wage was only 62 percent of a living wage.

Four workers are assigned to each mechanised plucking machine. Two operate the machine, while another carries the tea leaves to the weighing station and the fourth sorts the plucked leaves, choosing only the most tender.

This method can harvest 700 to 1,500 kilos per day, depending on the richness of the tender leaves and how fast workers operate. Supervisors drive workers to

achieve daily targets set by managers. In the Unilever plantations, “clerks” in police-type uniforms ride bikes, monitoring the activities of workers.

In large plantations, one can see many workers’ quarters or villages, consisting of single room or two-room houses comparable to plantation workers’ houses in India and Sri Lanka. Often more than one family lives in a house.

In Kericho, plantation corporations run schools and basic hospitals, with school fees deducted from workers’ pay. According to workers, most children do not continue to higher grades because the families cannot afford the schooling, and the children must work for a living. Even students who have studied up to college level are unemployed, however (see: “A visit to the workers’ quarters at a Unilever tea plantation in Kenya”).

In 2016, workers demanded pay increases of more than 30 percent but the Industrial Court granted only 16 percent. Around 40,000 workers in the Kericho, Bomet and Nandi plantations launched a campaign for better pay in 2017.

Companies such as Unilever and James Finlay refused to negotiate an outstanding Collective Bargaining Agreement with the Kenya Plantations and Agricultural Workers Union (KPAWU), the main trade union in the plantation sector. Established in 1963 and with around 200,000 members, the union is affiliated to the Central Organisation of Trade Unions (COTU).

When workers went on strike, the armed forces shot at a picket line, killing a worker. About 336 workers were sacked. KPAWU refused to mobilise the workers, promoting illusions in the courts instead. The Industrial Court ordered the reinstatement of workers, but overturned that order after an appeal by the plantation owners.

This experience shows how the plantation conglomerates work with the Kenyan state and trade unions to suppress workers’ demands.

Other than the big companies, there are many smallholder farmers in different areas. Groups of farmers, from 250 to 6,000, own tea factories, and rely on dividends. Around 10 percent of the population—around five million people—depends on the tea industry.

The Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) has 66 tea factories, which cater to 500,000 small-scale

farmers cultivating over 100,000 hectares. KTDA was privatised in 2000. KTDA members produce over 60 percent of the country’s tea, with the rest produced by large-scale operators.

Small-scale plantations use traditional methods of tea plucking and maintenance of plantations and have low productivity levels. According to a UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report, 50 percent of the smallholder farmers live below poverty line.

These conditions underscore the necessity for plantation workers in Kenya to unite with their class brothers and sisters in India, Sri Lanka and internationally to fight the predatory global corporations that exploit their labour.



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