

Thousands of Sri Lankan estate workers strike over workloads and wages

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Significant strikes by Sri Lankan plantation workers have broken out within two weeks of the country's November 16 presidential election, posing a challenge to the incoming administration of Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Thousands of workers joined strikes last week, rejecting attempts by companies to increase output, or protesting non-payment of promised salary increases.

Nearly 5,000 workers from four Horana Plantations estates launched a strike on November 29 against the introduction of digital identity cards and an electronic weighing machine system. The Alton, Goreville, Stockholm and Mahanilu estates are located at Upcot in the central plantation district. Horana Plantations is run by the Hayley's Group of companies.

The digital identity device contains a sim card that records workers' details. Workers must swipe the card against a weighing machine before going to work in the morning, and again at the end of the day's plucking. They get a full day's wage only if they produce 18 or more kilos of plucked tea leaves. If they fail to achieve the target, they are paid only half a day's wage.

This system has been introduced to compel workers to work without any rest. The management already has deducted 5,000 rupees from each worker to prepare the identity cards.

Workers at Alton went on strike in October when the new digital system was introduced, but the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and National Union of Workers (NUW) bureaucrats asked the company to delay its implementation and told workers to wait until after the presidential election. The two trade unions lined up behind the candidates of the main capitalist parties—the CWC with Gotabhaya Rajapakse of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and the NUW with Sajith Premadasa of the United National Party (UNP).

Management temporarily halted the system but reintroduced it on November 29. Workers immediately stopped work again. When local union officials met CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman, he told them he had signed an agreement with the company to introduce the new system and demanded workers accept it.

This revealed that Thondaman had reached a treacherous backroom deal with the company to intensify the exploitation of estate workers. He is a cabinet minister in President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government. Workers rejected his request and continued their strike.

On the night of November 29, police came to CWC local leader Perumal Rane's house at the Alton estate and tried to arrest him, but were prevented by angry workers. The police later returned, asking him to go to the police station the following day. He did so on November 30 and gave a statement on the strike. In protest at Thondaman's actions, Rane resigned from the CWC.

On December 2, NUW and local leaders advised workers to work according to the old norms without carrying the digital identity cards. But at the end of that day, the management refused to take their plucked tea. NUW local leader Jeya Balan tried to convince workers that they could change the system later, and asked them to go back to work. Outraged workers argued with him and said they would decide their next course of action the following day.

Speaking to the WSWS, one female worker from Alton estate commented: "Who gave the right to Thondaman to sign the agreement without our consent to implement this new system? These trade union leaders have sold us out. This system was introduced at Fordyce estate, Battalgala estate, Dickoya [estate]. Those workers told us not to accept the system. But

Thondaman asks us to accept it, saying that if we don't, we will die without a job.”

Another strike was launched from November 26 by about 1,500 estate staff at the Maskeliya, Kegalla and Namunukula plantation companies over non-payment of promised wage increases. Striking staff included office employees, field officers, doctors and health workers at estate dispensaries, lorry drivers and technical officers. Union bureaucrats aligned with the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) tried to postpone the strike but workers demanded immediate action.

The Employers' Federation had signed a collective agreement on October 1 with the Ceylon Estates Staffs' Union (CESU) to increase these workers' wages by 25 percent but the companies have refused to add the increase to workers' basic salaries. Instead, the companies granted the increase as an allowance that can be stopped at any time.

On November 29, about 300 employees from the Brunswick estate marched for three kilometres to Maskeliya town. They defied police attempts to halt the demonstration.

CESU president Chathura Samarasinghe said discussions were held with the companies but failed to resolve the dispute. He claimed that workers at other estates would join the strike from December 2 but nothing happened. The union has not appealed for workers at other estates for united action.

Union bureaucrats held another meeting on December 3 with the management but it also produced no agreement. Angry workers are continuing the strike. One staff employee at Brunswick explained another impact of the managements' refusal to raise the basic salaries. He told the WSWS: “When the salary increase is given as an allowance, it doesn't help to increase pension funds.”

The staff worker said he shifted to the Brunswick estate when the “income-sharing” scheme was implemented at the Goreville estate. As well as the tea-plucking workers, office employees also faced problems due to this scheme, he said. Under this scheme every worker is allocated about 1,000 tea bushes. Their whole families have to toil in order to maintain their plots. After deducting the supposed costs of companies' supplies, office maintenance and profits, workers are left with meagre incomes.

The staff employee criticised the trade unions for dividing workers and said the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) call for building action committees, totally independent of the unions, was essential for the common fight of workers. The SEP is fighting to build action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods, and urging workers to take up the struggle for socialist policies.

Last December, hundreds of thousands of plantation workers were in continuous struggle, including an 11-day strike, demanding a 100 percent wage increase. However, the unions betrayed the struggle. Workers received only a paltry 30-rupee increase and the unions agreed to implement the “income-sharing” regime.

Workers oppose this system, which severely affects their working conditions, income and basic rights, but the unions are acting as the employers' industrial police force, enabling the management offensive to escalate.



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