

Sri Lankan graphite mine workers strike over pay and conditions

Our correspondents
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Over 130 workers from the state-owned Kahatagaha Graphite Lanka mining company, walked out on strike on Tuesday over low pay and brutal working conditions. Workers also initiated a hunger strike about 600 metres below the surface, participating section by section, to highlight their demands.

Kahatagaha Graphite Lanka, which is administered by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, is located in Kurunegala District in the North Western Province, about 150 kilometres from the capital Colombo.

The mine workers reluctantly ended their strike on Thursday after senior officials from the Ministry of Industry and the company intervened and made a series of promises.

Workers were granted a paltry wage rise of 50 rupees (\$US 3 cents) a day, following discussions at the Kurunegala Labor Commissioner's office. Officials also promised to settle their other demands on February 28.

The mine workers told WSWs reporters that they have been subjected to numerous broken pledges by Sri Lankan governments and have no faith in the latest promises.

This week's industrial action by mine workers is a politically significant development and the first walk out this year against President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Last year, two weeks after Rajapakse's election on November 16, about 5,000 plantation workers across several estates in Nuwara Eliya district struck over promised pay rises and management attacks on working conditions.

Both strikes point to the widespread and seething social opposition across all sectors of the Sri Lankan working class that will erupt, sooner rather than later, and challenge the Rajapakse government.

The Kahatagaha Graphite workers' strike was initiated and maintained in defiance of the two existing trade unions at the mine, the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya and the Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya, which are affiliated to Sri

Lanka's two main capitalist parties, the United National Party and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party respectively.

These unions, whose local presidents did not participate in the walkout, have repeatedly scuttled Kahatagaha Graphite workers' struggles.

The mine workers' demands include: a wage increase backdated from 2012; 21 days annual leave, as stipulated under existing labour laws; a 7,800-rupee 'special allowance' for all workers, including contract employees; and Saturday working hours to end at 11.15 a.m., with overtime rates paid for additional hours after that.

The strikers also want permanent jobs for all contract workers that have been employed for over 180 days and for 13 "unskilled" labourers that have been at the mine for more than two years to be treated as skilled employees.

Mine workers told WSWs reporters about the low pay and harsh conditions they endure at the mine.

Working hours are from 7.15 a.m. to 2.15 p.m., with "unskilled" workers only paid 688 rupees per day (US\$3.80), compared with 982 rupees for permanent and skilled workers. Although workers are paid a 100-rupee meal allowance per day, this only covers two-thirds of the cost of the midday meal.

The mine currently employs 23 workers on six-month work contracts. Management uses this arrangement to evade official guidelines to make these employees permanent.

Annual leave is only 14 days, which is a violation of existing labour laws. Workers only recently learnt that they are entitled to 21 days leave annually. If a worker has four "no-pay" days leave per year they are penalised and their salary reduced.

The Kahatagaha Graphite mine, which was established by a private company in 1872 during the British colonial rule, was taken over by the Sri Lankan government in 1971.

The state-owned enterprise was closed in 2002, the government claiming it was not profitable, but reopened again in 2006. While the mine previously employed around 1,000 people, its workforce has been drastically reduced and currently employs around 135 workers.

In line with International Monetary Fund austerity demands, successive Sri Lankan governments in the past six years have pledged to slash spending and privatise key state-owned industries.

The workers have not been granted a pay rise since 2012, despite several strikes during this period. These strikes have been betrayed by the unions following bogus promises by successive governments.

One young worker who has been employed at the mine since 2018 explained that they were determined to win their demands.

Early this month, he and another 12 workers made an official complaint to the Labour Department Office in Kurunegala about the company's refusal to pay them, the contract workers and a permanent electrician a special allowance. They demanded that all contract workers be made permanent. The Labour Department is supposed to investigate their complaint on 28 January.

“Despite the popular promises of this government I don't think that they have any concern for the workers,” the young mine worker said. “If they have genuine concern there are ways to prove it. I've heard that management once called the special task force of the police to break a strike. The only things we've won at this mine has only been achieved through the struggle of workers.”

The author also recommends:

Workers must adopt a socialist internationalist program to oppose Sri Lanka's authoritarian, communalist Rajapakse regime
[7 December 2019]



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