

Sri Lanka: Kahatagaha mine workers speak with the WSWs

Our correspondents
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Workers from the state-owned Kahatagaha graphite mine, 133 kilometres north east of Colombo, spoke to WSWs reporters last week after a three-day strike and hunger protest to demand higher wages and improved working conditions.

While security officers prevented the reporting team from entering the mine area, claiming that prior permission from the ministry of industry was required, several workers spoke with the WSWs at the end of their shift outside the main gate. Concerned that they could be victimised, the workers asked that their comments be anonymous.

There is no proper transport to the isolated mine and almost all the workers travel there by motorbikes, including as pillion passengers. Once inside the main gate they have to travel over one kilometre to the mine head.

The strike, which involved the mine's 130-strong workforce, began last Tuesday and brought all production to a halt. Strikers demanded wage increases, job permanency and better working conditions. The action also included groups of workers taking turns to participate in a relay hunger strike inside the mine, 600 metres below the surface.

The walkout was organised in defiance of the two union branches at the mine—the Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya and the Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya, which are affiliated to the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) respectively. Both unions and their mine branch presidents were hostile to the strike and refused to participate. The SLFP union is currently backing President Rajapakse's ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP)-led government.

The Sri Lankan ministry of industry immediately dispatched senior officials to negotiate with strikers' representatives at the local labour commissioner's

office in Kurunegala.

One of the mine workers told the WSWs that the Minister of Industry and Commerce Wimal Weerawansa personally phoned Kurunegala labour commissioner's office during negotiations. "The minister told us that our union actions should not cause any inconvenience to the government," the worker explained.

Nervous about the political impact of the strike, which erupted just two months after Gotabaya Rajapakse was elected Sri Lankan president, Weerawansa promised the mine workers a miniscule 50-rupee (\$US3 cents) increase in the daily wage. He claimed that the pay rise was only a temporary measure and that the strikers' demands would be granted by February 28.

Rajapakse came to power in November, after falsely pledging to improve living conditions, amidst growing workers strikes and protest. His SLPP minority government will face a general election early this year.

The Kahatagaha graphite mine worker told WSWs reporters that he had supported Rajapakse in the presidential election but then asked: "What's the use of the government if it does not address workers' demands?"

"I'm a member of SLFP union but it didn't support the strike. What is the use of it? We took the action independently. In the past no government has addressed our demands," he added.

WSWS reporters described how successive Sri Lankan governments have restructured state-owned corporations and slashed subsidies in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies. They pointed out that the Rajapakse government was committed to the same austerity measures.

The mine worker commented in response: "We

didn't exactly know these things, as you've explained, but have experienced this situation and haven't been able to gain anything from the previous struggles we undertook. We don't have much faith in the promises we've now been given and would take action again."

The discussion continued on the political role of the trade unions and their defence of the capitalist system; workers' experience in Sri Lanka and internationally; and the necessity to build workers' action committees, independently of the unions, and to fight for socialist policies.

WSWS reporters met another graphite worker at his home in Goluwahena village. His mother answered the door and was at first reluctant to call her son because striking Kahatagaha graphite mine workers were witch-hunted during previous disputes. When reporters explained they were from WSWS, the worker came to the door and enthusiastically explained his experiences.

"I'm not afraid to fight for our demands. All our rights have been obtained only through a struggle" he said, and showed some photographs of previous strikes he had been involved in.

The former privately-owned facility was nationalised in 1972 by an SLFP-led coalition government. It was sold off to a private company in 1991, which retrenched many workers and imposed harsh working conditions. The company shut down the mine in 2002, claiming it was unprofitable.

The worker secured a job at the Kahatagaha graphite mine about a decade ago, after it was reopened under government control in 2006. He and other workers were forced to join the SLFP-controlled union because they were hired during a SLFP-led government. He has been involved in several struggles at the mine since then.

"If we take any action the unions threaten us, sometimes by threatening to discontinue their service. These unions are formed according to the needs of the governments of the day."

During a strike at the mine in 2016, Wasantha Samarasinghe, a union official from the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), visited the facility and attempted to establish a branch of his party's union. While the JVP postures as opponents of Colombo, the organisation and its union affiliates, like their UNP and SLFP counterparts, oppose any independent political mobilisation of workers against

employers and the government.

The worker said he was sceptical about the government granting workers' demands on February 28 and denounced the minister of industry's 50-rupee daily pay rise. "What's the use of 50-rupee increase when our monthly wage is totally inadequate" he declared. Unskilled workers at the mine are only paid 688 rupees (\$3.80) per day while skilled and permanent worker get 982 rupees and some additional allowances.

The wages are so low, he said, that mine employees need other jobs—carpentry, driving three-wheel taxis or working in agriculture—to pay their bills and make ends meet.

One contract employee said he was only paid about 23,000 or 24,000 rupees per month. He explained that he had to buy a bike because public transport is scarce in the area. Local residents have to wait for up to an hour in order to catch transport to nearby cities, such as Matale or Kurunegala. After paying his loan installments, he only had 7,000 rupees to cover his monthly expenses and was dependent on the family's major breadwinner, his father, who is a lorry driver's assistant.

Last week's strike by Kahatagaha graphite mine workers is both an initial indication of future working-class struggles that will erupt against the government and the rapidly disappearing illusions in the Rajapakse's bogus promises to raise workers' living standards. In line with the demands of the IMF and the major corporations, the new regime will ruthlessly move to impose the deepening economic crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism onto the backs of the working class.



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