

Sri Lanka: Hundreds of plantation workers strike to defend jobs and social rights

Our correspondent
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Over 500 Gartmore Estate workers at Maskeliya in central Sri Lanka remain on strike after walking out on December 28 to defend their jobs and social rights. On Wednesday, the strikers rejected an attempt by the plantation unions to push them back to work.

Gartmore workers are demanding a guarantee that their jobs and conditions, including provident fund and gratuity (pensions) payments will be continued by the new owner of the estate. The 290-hectare private estate was previously owned by the Soyza family.

Workers decided to strike last month independently of the plantation trade unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), National Unions of Workers (NUW) and Up Country People’s Front (UPF)—because these organisations are collaborating with management.

The CWC is part of the Rajapakse government with the union’s general secretary, Jeevan Thondaman, the current state minister of plantation infrastructure. The other plantation unions are associated with the right-wing opposition party, Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB).

On December 14, the workers were told by the previous owner that he would pay the gratuity of workers and retirees who had reached 55 to 60 years of age. He also said that the new owner would pay all benefits when workers retired.

The strikers did not trust these assurances, and the promised payments have still not been made. Four years ago, workers lost jobs when the Soyza family previously sold part of the estate.

Three rounds of recent discussions between the new management, the unions and labour officials have failed because the new owner has categorically rejected workers’ demands.

On January 17, the new owner told workers that they now faced new conditions.

Any worker whose productivity had been low for the

previous five years, he declared, would not receive the promised gratuity payments and would be registered as a new employee. There are 53 workers in this category. The new management also said that firewood for funeral houses would not be supplied because of the shortage of trees on the estate.

Gartmore workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that the current owner plans to develop tourist facilities on the estate, instead of tea, which would drastically reduce the workforce. Some workers also fear that important personal documents, including birth and death certificates, health and other family papers, currently in the estate office would not be protected under the new management.

Perumal said: “We need a written guarantee, not to abolish our previous rights. We also face losing jobs in the future. The trade unions tried to discourage us, saying that if we remain on strike, our children will starve and their studies will be disrupted.

“We regularly pay a subscription to the unions but they do not defend our rights. Instead they are cooperating with management against us. [President Gotabhaya] Rajapakse’s government promised to increase our daily wage to 1,000 rupees in recent elections. This was just an election promise.”

R. Wijeluxmy explained the economic and social difficulties workers and their families now faced. “We have to educate our children, repair our homes and manage other expenses from our meagre 700-rupee daily wage (\$US3.50). Like other workers, I paid 10,000 rupees (\$US51) to secure water supplies but we don’t get enough water during the dry seasons,” she said.

The Gartmore Estate workers’ determined strike is an expression of broader unrest developing in the country’s plantations. COVID-19 infections have been

discovered in some estates and workers fear that the deadly virus will rapidly spread through the dangerously overcrowded line-room accommodation on the plantations.

The pandemic has also drastically pushed up the price of daily essentials, making it difficult for plantation workers to survive on the inadequate 700-rupee daily wage.

During the November 2019 presidential elections, Gotabhaya Rajapakse pledged to address workers' long-standing demand for a 1,000-rupee daily wage. The promise was repeated again during last August's general election and is included this year's budget and passed by the parliament last November.

In December, Labour Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva, hoping to deflect the growing anger among workers over their pay rise demand, began discussions with Regional Plantation Companies (RPC) representatives.

While de Silva has had several rounds of negotiations with RPC and union representatives, employers have rejected outright the 1,000-rupee daily pay demand. Instead, the RPC has proposed two methods to "increase wages."

The first proposal is a so-called hybrid wage system in which employees work three days under the current daily wage system and three days on a contract basis, paid 50 rupees per kilo of tea leaves and receive their pension funds. Rubber plantation workers would be paid 125 rupees per kilo of latex.

The second proposal is for a 1,105-rupee daily wage. This includes a 700-rupee basic daily wage, 300 rupees for allowances and 105 rupees for pension funds.

In other words, both proposals fail to increase estate workers' daily wage to 1,000 rupees and each is designed to drive up productivity.

Confronted with the opposition of estate workers, the government and the trade unions have "disagreed" with the RPC's wage proposals. Labour Minister de Silva has said that he will submit a cabinet paper to establish a minimum daily wage through the government wages board.

The government and the unions, however, will not do anything that undermines the RPC's profits.

On December 5, de Silva told parliament that the wage issue should not be "one sided" and must "protect the plantation industry and the estate

companies." On the same day CWC leader Thondaman told the media that "the wage issue should not be a reason for killing the industry."

The RPC's so-called wage proposals are an attempt to overcome the plantation industry crisis that has deepened by the coronavirus pandemic and the associated fall in exports.

Estate workers' call for a meagre 1,000-rupee daily minimum wage, which was first made in 2015, is now insufficient. From the outset, the unions have systematically blocked or undermined workers fighting for this modest increase.

At the end of 2018, hundreds of thousands of plantations workers held ongoing protests and an 11-day strike. These struggles were betrayed by the unions, with the CWC, which signed a collective agreement limiting workers' daily wage to just 700 rupees, playing a major role.

In 2018, 1,000 rupees was worth about \$US7. This month the same amount is only \$US5.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members in the area have made several interventions into the Gartmore Estate dispute.

At a meeting on December 31, leading SEP member M. Thevarajah addressed workers, reviewing the political issues confronting plantation workers. He urged the strikers to break from unions and form their own action committees to organise united action with other plantation workers and take forward the struggle for their demands.

"Workers cannot defend their rights without the fight to nationalise the plantations and place them under the democratic control of the workers," Thevarajah said.

"These tasks," he added, "can be only be achieved as a part of the broader struggle for a socialism and uniting with the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally to bring about a workers' and peasants' government."



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