

# Sri Lanka: Hundreds of thousands of estate workers strike for a wage rise

Our correspondents  
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On February 5, nearly 200,000 plantation workers held a one-day strike demanding their basic daily wage be increased to 1,000 rupees (\$US5.50). In the Nuwara Eliya district, where the majority of Sri Lankan plantation workers live, the strike was widely supported by small traders, who closed their shops. Short-distance bus services stopped and teachers joined the campaign, sending sick notes and refusing to work.

Strikers held demonstrations in major towns in the district and on some estates. As well as demanding a pay rise, workers also called for improvements to estate housing and other social conditions.

The plantation workers' walkout—and the mass support for it—points to rising working-class opposition to the escalating attacks on living conditions, price increases on essential items and job losses as well as concerns about COVID-19. The plantation workers strike coincides with rising industrial action and struggles of workers internationally.

On February 3, two days before the plantation workers' national action, Annfield estate workers in Norwood, Dickoya went on strike and banned the transport of all tea products from the estate factory. Workers refused to allow a lorry packed with tea to leave the estate, ignoring management threats to impose a 40,000-rupee daily fine to cover losses allegedly incurred.

A local leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), who held a secret discussion with the estate management, directed workers to release the lorry. They refused to do so. An Upcountry People's Front (UPF) branch leader, who supported the workers' action, was penalised and suspended from work.

The February 5 strike was called by CWC and also involved UPF members. The National Union of Workers (NUW), Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union

(LJEWU) and the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) initially opposed the walkout, but after their members joined the action, were forced to declare their support.

The CWC is part of the Rajapakse government. CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman is the minister of plantation infrastructure. The other estate unions are in coalition with the Samagi Jana Balavegaya, a right-wing opposition party.

The CWC called the strike, not out of support for the rights of its members, but in order to dissipate workers' anger over the plantation companies' continuous refusal to grant the long-running 1,000-rupee basic wage demand.

CWC leader Thondaman told the media that “discussions held [last] Monday between the companies, government and trade unions would provide a solution because of the unity of the workers.”

The CWC's wage demand is for 1,000 rupees a day, comprising a daily wage of 725 rupees and 275-rupee allowance.

Plantation companies have proposed a 1,000-rupee daily wage, including allowances, but want workers to work three days on the basis of the daily wage and the other three days on contract, paid according the number of kilos of tea plucked.

The plantation bosses also want two additional kilos of tea per day in the three days workers receive the daily wage, and to extend the term of the collective agreement to four years. The current collective agreement is limited to two years.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened in the strike, issuing a statement in Sinhala and Tamil warning that the trade unions were attempting to impose the plantation companies' terms.

The statement called on workers to reject these

moves, saying: “In order to win a decent wage and other social rights, a general strike should be organised involving all plantation workers and with the support of other workers. Instead of a daily wage, workers should fight for a permanent and pensionable monthly salary of at least 50,000 rupees.”

The statement explained that in order to take forward a struggle for these demands, estate workers needed to build action committees independent of the trade unions. SEP members held long discussions with Annfield estate workers on the socialist program needed to win their rights.

The 1,000-rupee demand was initiated by the unions in 2015 but under conditions of skyrocketing living costs, its current real value has been drastically reduced. The unions, moreover, have betrayed every attempt by plantation workers to win their demand. In December 2018, around 200,000 workers walked out on strike for 11 days. This was betrayed by the CWC and a 700-rupee wage proposed by plantation companies, with the blessing of the government.

Annfield workers told the SEP that they did not believe that the plantation companies would grant their long-standing demand for a 1,000-rupee basic daily wage.

“We do not have any faith in this,” one worker said. “They tell us that we have to pluck two more kilos of leaves per day if we want to get this pay rise, but the current daily target of 16 kilos is already difficult to meet. If we don’t reach that target then we’ll only be paid half of the daily wage. At present we’re only able to pluck 8 to 10 kilos a day.”

Another worker said: “How can you live on such a meagre daily? The government is trying to trick us. It hasn’t increased our wages or given us any concessions. Instead, it makes all sorts of concessions to the companies. We ourselves have to repair our dilapidated estate homes. Neither the estate, the government nor the unions will do any of this maintenance for us.”

Sellamma discussed with SEP members the treacherous role being played by the unions and the need to establish an action committee independent of unions.

“We went on strike from February 3 to demand a basic daily wage of 1,000 rupees. Other estates joined the strike on February 5. I’m a CWC member but

don’t have any faith in this union.

“Earlier, seven divisions of our estate joined together in fighting for our demands but this strength has now been reduced because the revenue-sharing scheme was in other divisions of the estate.”

Under this system each worker is assigned a certain number of tea bushes, forcing the whole family to work and maintain the plot. Workers receive an income by selling the harvest to the company, which deducts the cost of fertiliser and other items from the amount paid to the family.

“We work under severe conditions,” Sellamma added, “but no union fights to change this situation. We have to pluck our target of 18 kilos tea leaves per day in order to get the full 700-rupee wage. If we don’t reach that target we only get a half-day wage. I agree that all workers must unite to win our demands and agree that the trade unions are working to divide us.”



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