

Sri Lankan estate workers protest against higher workloads and wage cuts

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14 May 2021

Demonstrations involving hundreds of workers have erupted at several tea estates in recent weeks against increased daily productivity demands and wage cuts.

In January, the Rajapakse government ordered plantation companies to pay a 1,000-rupee (\$US5) daily wage (a 900-rupee basic payment plus 100-rupee allowance) to tea and rubber estate workers, starting from April. The government's announcement was in order to dissipate the rising anger of plantation workers over their poverty-level wages.

Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) that manage the Sri Lankan estates opposed the increase and went to the courts to challenge the government's decision. Conscious of the mass opposition of plantation workers, the appeal court approved the government pay directive.

The plantation unions, particularly the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), falsely promoted the wage rise as a major victory for workers. The CWC is part of the Rajapakse government and the union's leader, Jeevan Thondaman, is a cabinet minister.

The RPCs have reacted to the court decision by attempting to drive up production to compensate for the pay increase and have introduced other measures to reduce workers' earnings.

On May 10, hundreds of workers at the Murray and Brunswick Estates, which are controlled by the Maskeliya Plantation Company, and the upper division of the Welioya Estate, which is owned by the Hatton Plantation Company, protested against increased work targets and management refusals to pay the 1,000-rupee daily wage.

About 700 workers from Murray Estate demonstrated over the company's failure to pay the new wage rates in April and against the new productivity targets. Management is demanding that the daily tea plucking target of 18 kilos be increased by 2 kilos to pay the 1,000-rupee wage.

Brunswick Estate workers walked out on strike over the

April pay rates. While management paid the 1,000-rupee daily rate it refused to pay for the additional teas plucked above the usual daily target. Brunswick Estate workers were previously paid an additional 40 rupees per kilo if they produced more than the daily target.

Welioya Estate workers protested for the same reason.

A week earlier, Bogawantalawa Estate workers demonstrated near the highway to Hatton in protest over similar cost-cutting measures. They told the media that management paid the new daily wage rate but had increased working hours, commencing work at 8 a.m. and not finishing until 6 p.m.

In April, Bogawantalawa Estate employees were only given two days' work a week and just 13 days for the entire month, drastically reducing their income. Management only allowed them a 15-minute tea break and reprimanded them if it went five minutes longer. They now have to harvest 20 kilos tea per day to earn 1,000 rupees. If they fail to do so, their wages are cut.

Glenugie Estate workers at Maskeliya walked out on April 23 over management demands that they pluck 20 kilograms of tea leaves per day.

On the same day, over 300 workers from the Talawakelle Troup Estate and the Corrine Estate protested for three hours after management demanded workers pluck 20 kilos of tea per day for six days and then the impossible target of 50 kilos on Sundays. Workers at the Lionorn Estate in Bogawantalawa also demonstrated near the tea factory against increased work targets.

At the Alton Estate in Maskeliya, the plucking target is 18 kilos for a 1,000-rupee daily wage. However, if a worker fails to achieve the target, they are only paid 500 rupees for nine kilos and 50 rupees per kilo for additional leaves. Overtime payments for field supervisors were also abolished at Alton after the government-imposed new wage scheme.

The increased workloads and cost-cutting measures at

estate after estate follows the brutal anti-democratic attacks on Alton Estate workers in the past months. The RPCs are determined to impose the economic impact of COVID-19 and falling tea exports on workers and crush all resistance.

Alton Estate workers, who participated in the CWC one-day strike on February 5 to demand the 1,000-rupee daily wage, remained on strike for another 47 days in protest against a company-police strike-breaking witch hunt.

Twenty-four workers and two youth were charged on frame-up allegations that they physically assaulted the manager and assistant manager at the estate. Thirty-eight workers, including those now facing court, have been sacked from jobs on that basis, without any inquiry being conducted.

The CWC collaborated with the company and the police in every step of witch hunt, including drawing up a list of names of Alton workers to be arrested and those to be sacked from their jobs. The National Union of Workers (NUW), which covers some workers at the estate, supported management's provocations and has refused to assist the framed-up workers.

Last month, supporters from eastern Batticaloa delivered food supplies to the sacked workers. On April 30, Hatton police summoned 10 workers and a teacher who initiated this relief work. They were questioned by police about their connection to the NGO and told not to engage in any future similar actions without police permission.

Significantly, this month's strikes and protests were organised independently of the plantation unions. Instead of supporting the industrial action, the unions appealed to management to negotiate the backbreaking workloads and wage cuts.

The dire conditions faced by estate workers, however, will worsen with rising COVID-19 infections in the plantations and at other workplaces.

Fordyce Estate near Hatton was recently placed in quarantine lock down, following the discovery of infected workers, as was the nearby Ingestre Estate. The Norwood Fashion Wear garment factory in Maskeliya was also closed after several workers tested positive.

When the quarantine period ended at Fordyce Estate, workers protested outside the estate's tea factory, denouncing the government and estate management for not providing workers with relief funds and essential items. Soldiers and police immediately erected barriers and stopped the protest.

The vast plantation area in Sri Lanka's central hill

district lacks proper healthcare facilities. There is no systematic testing of the hundreds of thousands of plantation workers, who live in congested line rooms where social distancing is impossible. The unions are committed to defending company profits and supporting the government's "reopening" of the economy.

Responding to the Socialist Equality Party's campaign in defence of the victimised Alton Estate workers, several workers formed an action committee to take forward this struggle.

The rising number of strikes and protests by plantation workers and other sections of the working class underline the urgency of workers establishing action committees, independent of unions, to defend their democratic and social rights.

A female worker from Brunswick Estate spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* this week about management's new productivity demands. "After this wage increase, management stopped paying us for additional kilos we plucked over the target," she said.

"In the rainy season, from January to May, we can harvest more and get additional income [added] to our wage. This is necessary because during dry season we can't even reach management targets and our income is less. In these times, we have to borrow to pay for our daily expenses."

The worker denounced the CWC's celebratory claims that the government-ordered pay rise was a victory, adding, "We are losing now. The trade unions have always cheated us."

Referring to the 2019 conference organised in Hatton by the SEP and the Abbotsleigh Workers Action Committee, she said, "You explained [at the conference] about the treachery of the unions. This has been confirmed every day since."



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