

Peasant protests demanding fertiliser erupt across Sri Lanka

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29 October 2021

Tens of thousands of farmers in Sri Lanka have been involved in daily protests since the beginning of September to demand fertiliser be provided for paddy cultivation during the Maha (north-east monsoon) season. Peasants growing paddy, vegetable and other commercial crops have held demonstrations in paddy fields, farmland and in the cities.

The protests were precipitated by the Rajapakse government's sudden decision in April to ban imports of chemical fertiliser and other agrochemicals. President Rajapakse attempted to justify the ban by claiming that chemical fertiliser, along with pesticides and fungicides, had caused health problems in rural areas.

The real reason for the ban, however, was because the government confronted a rapid drop in foreign reserves caused by the global crisis and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Colombo also slashed many other imports to try and save its foreign exchange holdings.

With Sri Lanka's annual imports of fertiliser costing about \$US400 million, the government also wants to end the meagre fertiliser subsidy it provides farmers.

The farmers' protests, which initially began in June, were halted during the six-week lockdown imposed on August 21 in response to the Delta variant rapidly spreading across the island.

The demonstrations resumed when the lockdown was lifted last month, the rural masses fearing that their crops would fail without fertiliser and other necessary agrochemicals, throwing them deeper into poverty. The peasants and small farmers have threatened to abandon all cultivation if they are not given fertiliser. Some groups have said they will march to Colombo in their thousands if the government does not address their demands.

Speaking to the media, farmers have angrily explained that crops failed for the last Yala (north-western monsoon) season because they did not have fertiliser. Television reports have shown demonstrating farmers burning and destroying failed sweet corn and other crops.

Several farmers spoke to the WSWS about the problems they confront.

Karunaratne, a farmer from Ginnoruwa in Uva Province, explained that farmers' representatives had clashed with Mahaweli irrigation project officials at a meeting. Mahaweli is Sri Lanka's largest irrigation scheme. When officials proposed releasing water to prepare paddy fields for cultivation, the farmers' representatives refused to accept any water until they were provided with fertiliser. Similar incidents occurred in several other places in meetings with

irrigation officials.

Abeyratne, a peasant from Hebarawa in the same area, described the extreme indebtedness of farmers and peasants. "Without fertiliser our situation has now gone from bad to worse," he said. "We are living under conditions of never-ending indebtedness. Every new season we hope to save ourselves from the debt issue but it never happens and the price of everything, including food items, has gone up to unbearable levels.

"I borrowed 50,000 rupees (\$US250) by pawning my gold chain and ring in order to obtain money for last year's cultivation. Now the banks refuse to give any new loans because the previous loans haven't been settled. Last season I had to borrow from a lender who charged higher interest rates but our harvest was reduced by a half because there was no fertiliser. How are we going to be able to pay back these loans?"

A 36-year-old woman from Kilinochchi, in the country's war-torn north, said that it was hard to make any profit from rice cultivation, even with the necessary fertiliser and agrochemicals. "I prepared the land hoping to receive manure but nothing happened," she said. "I'm a tenant farmer but if we can't cultivate rice in this season then we won't be able to get land for the next."

Gunatileke, a vegetable farmer from Bandarawela, said: "Peasants have been using inorganic manure for decades so it's impossible for them to get used to organic manure all at once. Farmers have not even been guaranteed the provision of other suitable inputs. How can one prevent pests and various diseases affecting crops without pesticides? Some of these chemicals are available on the black market but at intolerable prices."

Sri Lankan Agriculture Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage has insulted farmers and peasants, claiming that the multibillion-dollar profit-making agrochemical companies were behind the protests.

President Rajapakse insisted that the government would not remove the fertiliser import bans. But when plantation companies warned that this would drastically impact tea production, the government quickly allowed imported fertilisers for that industry. Sri Lanka hopes to earn \$1.4 billion from tea exports this year.

Many Sri Lankan agricultural scientists have criticised the government's sudden bans and called for the combination of inorganic and organic agricultural inputs, based on a proper plan, and systematically implemented. They warned that Colombo's hurried actions would result in declining harvests and a severe food shortage.

Last week, the government began importing shipments of nano-nitrogen liquid fertiliser, a type of chemical fertiliser, from India for distribution among farmers. Agricultural specialists, however, warned that this was not a viable solution. Saman Dharmakeerthi, a professor of soil and agriculture management at the University of Peradeniya, said the liquid fertiliser was only four percent nitrogen and that this was inadequate.

Agriculture Minister Aluthgamage has said that farmers would be compensated if they incurred losses and that government authorities were ready to purchase a kilo of paddy at a guaranteed 70-rupee price if farmers cultivated their crops with organic manure.

Aluthgamage's promises and the import of nano-nitrogen have not succeeded in quelling the protests, which are the result of decades of accumulated discontent and anti-government distrust that has deepened with the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to a 2016 government survey, over 142,300 rural households were under the then-official 4,116-rupees poverty line and 61 percent of rural households were indebted. The poverty-line figure, even on 2016 data, was insufficient for survival, and the high debt levels have worsened exponentially during the last five years.

The lack of adequate land, exploitation by the banks, usurers, agricultural companies and their middlemen, along with the spiralling cost of cultivation, are just the most obvious problems confronting the rural masses.

The opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), which was formed early last year by a majority of MPs from the United National Party (UNP), and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have intervened in the farmers protests in an attempt to politically exploit and derail them.

Sajith Premadasa, the SJB parliamentary opposition leader, has been seen mingling among farmers in several parts of the country, feigning concern and calling on the government to remove the fertiliser ban, while insisting his party would resolve farmer's problems. These claims are worthless.

The capitalist SJB, in fact, has called on the Rajapakse government to appeal to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to solve the economic problems. But as the Sri Lankan masses are fully aware, the sort of solutions proposed by the IMF and slavishly implemented by consecutive Sri Lankan governments have been for a full-scale austerity restructuring of the economy.

Economic reforms implemented by UNP governments since 1977 have seen the rural farming sector opened up to big business, and the systematic gutting of fertiliser and other necessary subsidies for farmers. Successive Sri Lankan governments since then have intensified these policies. Current SJB leaders were part of the 2002–2004 UNP administration and Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government in 2015–2019 which brutally imposed these assaults.

The JVP-controlled All Ceylon Farmers Organisation, which has organised many of the current protests, is attempting to direct the pent-up anger against Agriculture Minister Aluthgamage. At demonstrations, farmers' have beaten and burned his effigy.

The JVP and its farmers' organisation are deliberately attempting to cover up the fact that the root cause of the

government's social attacks is the capitalism profit system.

Since the early 1990s, the JVP has transformed itself into a party of the Colombo political establishment, openly propping up capitalist rule in Sri Lanka.

In 2004, the JVP became part of Chandrika Kumaratunga's coalition government and held four ministries. Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the JVPs' current leader, was appointed Kumaratunga's agriculture minister and actively imposed her regime's austerity measures.

The JVP supported former President Mahinda Rajapakse and then moved to bring the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government to power in 2015. When workers' and peasants' struggles erupted against that government, the JVP intervened to divert the movement into futile appeals to the government.

The SJB, JVP and the peasant organisations are promoting the illusion that peasants' and farmers' problems, including the fertiliser issue, can be resolved by pressuring the Rajapakse government. This is false.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite and their successive governments have not, and never will, address the social and democratic problems of workers and the poor. Amidst an unprecedented crisis triggered by the pandemic, the Rajapakse government and the capitalist class are preparing even more brutal attacks on the masses.

The Rajapakse regime and all the opposition parties fear that the peasant protests are merging with the rising industrial action and strikes of the Sri Lanka working class, as part of the emerging international class struggles.

The working class must provide political leadership to the rural masses and expose all the reactionary attempts to keep them under the wing of Sri Lanka's capitalist parties. Workers must build action committees to unify their struggles against Colombo's ruling elite, expand this work amongst agricultural workers and to rally the rural poor.

The problems facing the peasantry can only be solved if they are freed from the grip of companies dominating agriculture, the various intermediaries exploiting them and the banking system which keeps them indebted. This requires the nationalisation of the large estates, the giant agribusinesses and the banks under workers' democratic control.

Such a program can be only implemented in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to end capitalist rule, including the Rajapakse government, as part of the struggle for international socialism.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only organisation advancing this perspective. Join the SEP to fight for this program.



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