

Sri Lanka: Katukelle Estate workers fight management attacks on wages and conditions

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About 130 Katukelle Estate workers on Monday rejected management demands to sign a harsh new productivity agreement before being allowed to resume work at the tea estate. The workers have been locked out since September 29.

Katukelle, which is part of the Talawakelle Estate and managed by the Maskeliya Plantation Company, is in Nuwara Eliya district, about 130 kilometres from Colombo.

Management's attack on the workers followed a six-day strike from August 18 to 24 over increased workloads. Management demanded individual tea-plucking targets be increased from 16 to 20 kilos per day and pesticide spraying rates be doubled.

Katukelle workers walked out again on September 26 in response to management harassment following the August strike. They struck again on September 29, after management victimised P. Ponnirselvi, a female worker, because she opposed the company using outside workers to break the strike.

To fight the witch-hunt against Ponnirselvi, workers held a demonstration outside the muster shed. A clash ensued during which three estate officials and two workers, including Ponnirselvi and S. Sri Devi, were injured. Workers accused management of provoking the conflict.

Management called the police and 11 workers, including Srikanth, Sivagnam, Sashiraho, M. Sivaneshwaran, M. Vajidaran Balachandran and P. Wijayalakshmi, were arrested. Ponnirselvi and Sri Devi were taken into custody while they were being treated at the hospital on the same day.

All the arrested workers were remanded until October 7, with harsh bail conditions imposed by Nuwara Eliya magistrate, including having to personally report to the police station on the last Sunday of every month and to not engage in any protests. No management officials were

arrested.

Katukelle management then stepped up its anti-democratic actions, insisting that estate workers would not be employed until they signed a repressive work agreement, whose conditions include:

- * Workers and union leaders must agree not to be involved any "illegal" action, such as physical attacks on management officers. They also must agree to work under the direction of those officers involved in the September 29 clash.

- * Katukelle workers must agree to allow outside workers being hired for field work. In other words, they must accept management using strike-breakers.

- * To receive the 1,000-rupee (\$US5) daily wage, employees must accept the new increased productivity targets. Those unable to meet the targets will be paid according to their production and working hours.

Workers were also told that they could not gather near the muster shed in the morning, as they usually do, before they start work, and they were directed to get their wages from the estate's office or through their bank accounts.

On November 17, company officials organised a discussion with local union leaders. The officer in charge of Talawakelle police station was also invited to the meeting. Management reportedly agreed to allow all employees, apart from the 11 charged workers, to return to work. But on November 22, managers insisted no one could resume work unless they signed the new agreement. Workers immediately rejected the company ultimatum.

Katukelle management is able to unleash these attacks because it has the full backing of the plantation unions—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), National Union of Workers (NUW) and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU).

The CWC is part of the Rajapakse government and its leader, Jeevan Thondaman, is Sri Lanka's state minister for estate infrastructure affairs. The NUW and LJEWU

are in alliance with the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya and its leaders were ministers of past regimes. None of these unions have defended the Katukelle workers but deliberately, and systematically, isolated them.

By contrast, workers from two other divisions of the estate, and independently of the unions, decided to back their colleagues at Katukelle by joining the September 29 walkout.

In early October the unions organised a discussion in Hatton with the government's assistant commissioner of labour and Katukelle management to try to dissipate local plantation workers' rising anger. The Katukelle manager refused to discuss any of the workers' demands and walked out of the meeting.

The Planters Association, which represents senior estate managers, has sent a letter to government authorities accusing workers of increased "violence," and demanding they take "stern action against the perpetrators of these attacks and ensure that incidents of this nature are not repeated."

The *Sunday Times* reported on October 3 that the Planters Society, which also represents estate officials, has called on the government "to intensify the night army patrols within the estate to avert threats posed by the workers."

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The open calls of estate companies and their managers for state repression is a warning, not just to Katukelle estate employees but all plantation workers. The ruthless productivity targets and escalating attacks on jobs, wages and living conditions are an attempt to place the full burden of the economic crisis worsened by the global pandemic on the working class.

Tea plantation industry chiefs and their managers have long demanded the adoption of a "revenue share scheme" in which workers and their families are allocated around 1,000 tea bushes to cultivate, maintain and harvest, with companies supplying essentials, such as manure and basic equipment. The companies would take the harvest and, after deducting their "expenses" and profits, give the remainder to the worker. Workers have overwhelmingly opposed this socially regressive share-cropper style system.

The ongoing attacks on Katukelle estate workers are similar to the repressive actions early this year against striking Alton estate workers who demanded a 1,000-rupee daily wage. The Alton workers were

subjected to a series of provocations by management. The company, working with the police, assisted by unions, including the CWC, had 24 workers arrested on bogus violence charges and then victimised and sacked 38 workers. The Socialist Equality Party was the only organisation that campaigned against the witch hunt.

The determined action of Katukelle estate workers is reflected in recent strikes by other plantation workers, who have fought back against company and police attacks.

On November 22, about 200 workers from Welioya estate in Hatton's upper division walked out to demand an end to higher workloads and for the reinstatement of five workers targeted by management following a demonstration in June. These workers were arrested after protesting to demand COVID-19 pandemic relief when infections hit the estate.

On November 19, over 300 workers from the Deeside division of Glenugie estate in Up-Cot, Maskeliya held a three-day strike—the second time in two months—to protest increased workloads and wage cuts.

These strikes are part of a wave of workers' struggles across Sri Lanka, including a more than 100-day strike action of teachers, demonstrations by 100,000 development officers, and strikes by tens of thousands of public and private sector workers for higher pay and improved conditions earlier this month.

Plantation workers at the Glenugie, Abbotsleigh and Alton estates have recently established Action Committees independent of the trade unions. On November 16, SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah addressed a gathering of Katukelle estate workers, explaining that they had to build action committees, independent of the unions. It was necessary, he said, to turn to other sections of the working class in order to develop a unified struggle to defeat employers' attacks on wages and conditions, on the basis of socialist program.



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