

Sri Lankan plantation workers strike and demonstrate for overthrow of Rajapakse government

Our correspondents
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Yesterday about 300 tea plantation workers from the Glenugie Estate near Upcot in Sri Lanka's central plantation district joined a strike calling for the overthrow of the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and for a government of workers and peasants.

The strike was called by the Glenugie Estate Workers Action Committee (GEWAC), which was formed with the political support of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

In addition to demanding the replacement of the Rajapakse government with a government of workers in alliance with the rural poor, the main slogans of the strike opposed the formation of any interim government of the parliamentary parties. The slogans included "Reject interim government" and "Break from unions and form action committees at every estate and workplace."

The walkout was called amid growing protests throughout the country demanding the ouster of the Rajapakse government over its brutal austerity measures, the skyrocketing cost of essential food items, fuel, cooking gas and medicine shortages, and the extended daily power cuts.

The GEWAC met the previous evening and decided to organise a one-day strike and hold a demonstration. GEWAC members went door-to-door at workers' quarters informing them of the strike call. Glenugie workers responded enthusiastically, indicating the developing opposition among plantation workers to the government.

Yesterday morning, striking workers joined the GEWAC protest at Malliheppu Junction, where the estate office is located. About 50 initially joined the

demonstration with numbers increasing to more than 100 as other workers joined.

SEP political committee member M. Thevarajah and party member Kandipan, the GEWAC secretary, led the chanting of slogans, such as: "Overthrow the Rajapakse government," "Reject interim government," "Fight for a government of workers and peasants," "Break from the unions" and "Form action committees." Workers displayed placards with similar slogans.

In addition, workers raised their own slogans, demanding: "Gotabhaya [Rajapakse] must go," "All Rajapakses must go" and "They all are thieves." Other slogans related to the soaring prices of essential food items.

At the conclusion of the demonstration, before a march toward Upcot town, Kandipan addressed the gathering. He said: "Plantation workers are facing unbearable conditions with the skyrocketing cost of living. The prices of essential goods are increasing almost daily. We are facing starvation conditions. It is in this situation that plantation workers are coming to fight against the Rajapakse government, alongside other workers and the oppressed masses."

Kandipan pointed out that the trade unions were silent about the ongoing popular movement against the Rajapakse government. He explained that workers needed to break from the unions and form action committees at every estate and workplace. He also explained the need for workers to fight to overthrow the Rajapakse government and establish a government of workers and peasants.

Following the demonstration, which lasted for an hour, about 150 workers shouting the slogans marched about one kilometre to the tea factory on the D-side

division of the estate. D-side division workers joined the protest and the march returned to Malliheppu Junction and then towards Upcot town. By then, about 200 workers had joined the march, which concluded near the town.

Addressing workers at the end of the march Thevarajah said: “The GEWAC has called the strike of Glenugie workers with the support of the SEP on these basic slogans: ‘Overthrow the Rajapakse government,’ ‘Reject any interim government,’ ‘Fight for a government of workers’ and peasants’ and socialist policies,’ ‘Break from the unions and build action committees at every estate and workplace,’ and ‘Workers of the world unite.’

“There are massive protests all over the country, including in the North and East, demanding the resignation of the Rajapakse government. This is the only demonstration and meeting based on an alternative independent working-class program and perspective for a government of workers and peasants.”

The speaker explained the need to establish the unity of Sri Lankan workers with their class brothers and sisters internationally in the struggle against the Rajapakse regime. The International Committee of the Fourth International, as the world party of socialist revolution, is fighting to mobilise the support of the international working class for Sri Lankan workers, he said.

Thevarajah outlined the bitter historical experiences of workers in Sri Lanka. “Successive bourgeois governments during the almost 74 years of so-called independence in Sri Lanka have provided no solutions for working people. Tens of thousands of Tamils in the North and East were killed during 30 years of the anti-Tamil racist war and tens of thousands of Sinhala rural youth in the south were killed during the 1988–89 period. Immediately after independence, the citizenship rights of plantation workers were abolished,” he said.

The speaker also pointed to the disastrous consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and danger of a world war posed by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia. “Now, after all these experiences, workers and the oppressed masses have come onto streets against the Rajapakse government. This is the time for workers to prepare to take power, as the Russian workers did in October 1917,” he said.

The walkout at Glenuge Estate is an indication of the

growing movement of workers in the plantations and throughout Sri Lanka as part of the developing class struggles internationally. Plantation workers are among the most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class. Amid the social and political crisis in the country triggered by the pandemic, the plantation companies have deepened their attacks on the conditions of workers and increased workloads.

The trade unions have taken the side of the big plantation companies and the government authorities. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) was a partner in President Rajapakse’s government and the CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman was a state minister. As the masses came onto the streets against the Colombo regime, Thondaman resigned from the government. He declared in parliament yesterday that two CWC MPs had decided to act independently of the government.

We urge plantation workers throughout Sri Lanka to build similar action committees to fight for the defence of their rights and unite with other sections of the working class in a broader struggle for socialist policies.



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