

Sri Lankan farmers speak out over catastrophic conditions

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Millions of Sri Lankan farmers are being hard hit by ongoing government attempts to impose the burden of the country's unprecedented economic crisis on the working class and the rural masses.

Farmers confront shortages of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, fuel and spare parts for agricultural machinery, along with exorbitant price rises in all agricultural inputs. In addition, there is no proper guaranteed price system for their products, as well as growing indebtedness and high interest rates on loans.

Farmers have been protesting for more than a year against the former Rajapakse government's sudden decision to reduce import costs by banning chemical fertiliser, pesticides and weedicides under the guise of transforming Sri Lanka agriculture into an organic producer.

In April, farmers joined the mass protests and demonstrations of workers and other oppressed layers across the country demanding the resignation of Rajapakse and his government. While these struggles forced Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign as president, the mass movement was betrayed by the trade unions, backed by pseudo-left groups.

The Wickremesinghe government, which replaced Rajapakse, is ruthlessly implementing International Monetary Fund austerity measures and worsening the plight of workers, farmers and the rural poor.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members in recent weeks have been campaigning among farmers in northern parts of the island as part of the party's struggle for the establishment of action committees and for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses in Sri Lanka.

Chankanai, which is about 14 kilometres from Jaffna city, is a large farming area. While there are some large farms, most of the farmers cultivate small parcels of land, generally between one or half an acre.

During the Maha season (the north-east monsoon season from September to March) they cultivate paddy, and in other seasons, vegetables such as green chilli, brinjal or potatoes. While there is some limited irrigation from wells, most depend on the seasonal rains.

Like other farmers across Sri Lanka, their harvests have been drastically reduced by the government-imposed shortages and excessive increases in the cost of essential inputs. As a result, many day-wage workers lost work and cattle farmers are struggling to feed their cattle. Fuel shortages now mean that farmers are compelled to use bicycles to transport their produce to the nearby Chankanai market and other local areas. Farmers are increasingly at the mercy of middlemen who set the prices of the produce.

P. Ananthan, a farmer, said: "I rely on farming. I'm using my field for paddy cultivation during the Maha season while growing green chilli, brinjals, Kurakkan during other times. Our work was severely hit by the ban on fertilisers which badly reduced my harvest.

"The government forced us to use organic fertilisers but did not supply them. This immediate turn to organic fertiliser was a big problem. Although the government later removed its ban on the import of fertiliser, peasants are still facing shortages and high prices," he explained.

"Our produce is likely to be infected by insects and affected by weeds. We need proper weedicides," he said. "Due to the lack of kerosene, we have had to buy petrol water pumps or man-made diesel water pumps which cost more than 75,000 rupees (\$US208).

While the official price of kerosene in Sri Lanka was previously 87 rupees a litre, the government increased this to 340 rupees—a 290 percent rise—hitting farmers, fishermen and estate workers. Ananthan said that he had paid 1,000 rupees for a litre of kerosene on the black-market, adding that the cost of renting machines used in cultivation had also risen.

A daily-paid farm worker told SEP members about his worsening situation. “Our working days have been reduced because of poor harvests. Landowners are now only calling us to work one or two days a week. Our families have fallen into poverty, and we are forced to try and do odd jobs,” he said.

“We are struggling to make our ends meet and prices are soaring every day. We are poor people. We have huge loans and we are living in homes that are not completely built. Our children are starving and they can’t undertake their education study at night because of the power cuts,” he said.

During the discussion another person said: “We’re not able to struggle like Sinhalese people because we don’t have security. We confronted immense problems and difficulties during the 30 years of war [the Sri Lankan government’s communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam].

“If we start fighting for our social rights, they [police and military] will arrest us or gun us down. We don’t have a proper leadership. The Tamil National Alliance [TNA] is only interested in getting our votes during election periods. They don’t come near us after that,” he said.

SEP campaigners explained the necessity for a united political struggle with the working class across Sri Lanka to fight all forms of government repression, including for the withdrawal of the military from the North and East.

“This unity has been displayed during the recent workers’ struggles. Workers from the North and the rest of the country struck to work together, showing their solidarity across the ethnic divide. However, the Tamil parties, including TNA, said the struggle was a Sinhala people’s affair and that the Tamil masses should not join. The Tamil capitalists, like their Sinhala counterparts, fear a united struggle of workers and farmers which is why they use communalism to divide workers.”

The farmers responded, saying they were ready to support this action if there was a correct leadership and agreed to study the SEP statement calling for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses and to hold further discussion.

On August 22, farmers demonstrated in Kilinochchi to demand diesel for work related to their Yala season (May to the end of August) harvest. They submitted a letter to the local Government Administrative Officer Divisional Secretary warning that if they were unable to harvest their crops, they would not be able cultivate next season’s crops. Kilinochchi, which is 70 kilometres south of Jaffna,

is the main farming area in Sri Lanka’s north. The demonstration was a small indication of the widespread anger and frustration in farming communities.

S. Jeyakumar, a farmer from Murasumoddai, Kilinochchi, explained: “Fuel and fertiliser are the top problems we face. As a consequence, we have had to reduce the scale of our cultivation and we will be forced to stop cultivation in the coming season. Shortage of chemical fertilisers has meant that our harvest has been reduced from 150 bags from 15 acres, to just 40 or 50 bags.

“I’ve not been given any Iranaimadu channel water to my paddy field and so I’ve had to use wastewater for the field. We need a water pump to fetch that water but due to the lack of kerosene I cannot properly get water for the field,” he said.

Jeyakumar has borrowed 150,000 rupees, through loans and a bank mortgage, to buy what he needs for cultivation. “I don’t know if I can even earn enough money to settle these debts. Nowadays we are preparing to harvest but due to the lack of diesel no traders are coming from the south to purchase our outputs. Exploiting our plight, the local middlemen are purchasing our produce at a very low price.”

The desperate situation facing peasants and the rural masses cannot be solved outside a struggle against Sri Lankan capitalism.

Farmers need to be provided with all the necessary requirements to cultivate their land, including fertilisers, pesticides, fuel, guaranteed prices for their crops and the cancellation of all debt. The necessities can be provided through nationalisation of the banks, large estates and major companies under workers’ democratic control and repudiation of foreign loans. Building action committees of workers and the rural masses is necessary to fight for these demands as part of the broader struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement a socialist program.



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