

Sri Lanka: Glenugie Estate workers protest wage cuts and harsh conditions

M. Thevarajah
16 September 2022

On Monday, over 75 workers from Glenugie Estate, at Upcot in the Nuwara-Eliya district, protested wage cuts by the Maskeliya plantation company, amid the country's escalating cost of living. The demonstration outside the estate's office was called by the Glenugie Estate Workers Action Committee (GEWAC).

Over the past month, the wages of all Glenugie Estate workers who fail to reach new unrealistic daily work targets have been cut by more than half. The daily tea leaf plucking target has increased from 16 to 20 kilograms and the land clearing target doubled from 75 to 150 square metres.

The wage cuts and work targets are part of the ongoing and systemic attempts by the Sri Lankan tea plantation companies, with the assistance of the trade unions, to drive up productivity and boost profits.

The protesting workers held signs with slogans such as: "Stop wage cuts," "Stop the increase workloads" and "Stop price increases of essentials." They also called for reinstatement of sacked and victimised Alton Estate workers and the immediate withdrawal of frame-up charges against them. Other slogans called for an end to International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures, the building of action committees and for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural masses.

The estate branches of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the National Union of Workers (NUW) have done nothing to oppose the increased workloads and wage cuts.

Instead, their leaders attempted to disrupt the protest. CWC and NUW local leaders met workers personally, telling them they needed police permission to hold a protest and management would victimise anyone who joined the action. Many workers, however, defied this intimidation and participated in the protest, which was reported by Shakti FM Radio and *Thamilan*, a Tamil newspaper.

A female worker from Glenugie Estate's Deeside division told the *World Socialist Web Site* how management had cut wages and driven up productivity.

"Last month, I worked 18 days, but was only paid 9,350

rupees (\$US25). My actual wage should be 18,000 rupees, according to the 1,000-rupee daily wage ordered by the courts, but they avoided paying the 1,000-rupee daily amount by increasing targets that we cannot fulfill. We cannot manage on this meagre wage because the prices of everything are rising daily."

Another worker said he had worked 28 days but was only paid 16,400 rupees. "None of the trade unions has opposed this unjustifiable wage cut," he added.

In order to receive the 1,000-rupee daily wage, workers have to pluck 20 kilograms of tea leaves. If a worker plucks 12 kg, they are only paid 500 rupees for 10 kg, with additional amounts paid on the basis of 40 rupees per kilo.

While estate workers have been fighting for years for higher wages, these struggles have been suppressed by the companies, assisted by the unions.

A graphic example of the treacherous role of the unions is revealed in their response to action taken last year by Alton Estate workers in Upcot. In early 2021, hundreds of Alton workers went on strike to demand higher wages. The estate manager reacted with a series of provocations.

When Alton workers opposed this harassment and held protests outside the estate manager's residence on February 17, 2021, he concocted a story, claiming that workers had damaged his residence and physically harmed him.

As a result, 22 workers were arrested, and still face ongoing court cases, and the company summarily sacked 38 workers. The CWC directly assisted this conspiracy while the other estate unions said nothing, silently supporting this repression.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Alton Estate Workers Action Committee initiated by the SEP are the only organisations fighting to defend these workers, demanding their full and unconditional reinstatement, and the complete withdrawal of the trumped-up company-police charges.

Fearing the rising anger of plantation workers over their poverty-level wages and social conditions, the government of former president Gotabhaya Rajapakse, in collaboration with the unions, ordered the plantation companies in April

2021 to pay a 1,000-rupee daily wage.

This was rejected by the plantation companies, which filed a case calling for the labour minister's gazette announcing the wage hike to be revoked. On August 9, an appeal court dismissed companies' case.

The judiciary's decision indicates ongoing concerns in sections of the ruling elite over the growing unrest, not just among plantation workers but in the working class as a whole. This was reflected this year with the eruption of mass protests and general strikes that brought down the Rajapakse regime.

The plantation unions hailed the court judgment, with CWC president Senthil Thondaman declaring it a "victory for plantation workers and the CWC."

This claim is completely false. Firstly, the companies are continuing their efforts to drive up productivity and cut wages, and secondly, even if the 1,000-rupee daily wage is paid, it is a pittance in the face of the skyrocketing increases in the cost of essentials.

When the demand for a 1,000-rupee daily wage was first raised five years ago, the unions used this to block a much-higher pay increase needed by plantation workers who are among the lowest paid sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

The plight of plantation workers is the direct result of the betrayals of the unions—the CWC, NUW, Up Country Peoples Front, Democratic Workers Front and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU). They have a long and sordid record of undermining the fight for higher wages and improved conditions.

With anger rising in the plantations, LJEWU general secretary Vadivale Suresh recently presented a memorandum to the labour ministry calling for estate workers' daily wages to be increased to 3,250 rupees. Previously controlled by President Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP), the LJEWU is now run by the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, which evolved out of the UNP.

The LJEWU's wage proposal is cynical posturing aimed at hoodwinking plantation workers. It will be ignored by the Wickremesinghe government, which is fully committed to implementing new IMF-dictated austerity. This includes higher taxes and higher prices for essentials, along with privatisation and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs. Like their counterparts across the country, the plantations unions support the IMF austerity program.

CWC leaders recently met with Wickremesinghe. CWC president Thondaman told the Tamil daily *Veerakesari* that they discussed the economic crisis.

"We specifically asked about the demands of the IMF and the president's plans to develop the country economically," Thondaman said, adding: "As a party which understands

well the country's situation, the CWC's policy is not to demand this or that."

In other words, because the capitalist economy is in a deep crisis, the CWC will not make any demands on behalf of workers and will suppress their struggles.

The rising unrest at Glenugie and in other estates over wage cuts and impossible workloads poses the necessity for workers to take their struggles into their own hands. That is why the SEP initiated the action committees at the Glenugie and Alton estates, and urges workers to form action committees in every estate, independent of the unions and the capitalist parties.

Estate workers need a decent monthly wage, not based on productivity targets, but in line with the rising cost of living. Accordingly, they need a 75,000-rupee minimum monthly wage, indexed to the cost of living, as well as full pension rights, fully paid medical leave, improved health and education facilities, and decent housing in the plantations.

The fight for these demands must be taken forward in unity with the broader struggle of workers and poor against the savage austerity measures of Wickremesinghe's government and the capitalist class.

The SEP insists that in order to defend jobs, wages and other social rights, workers must fight for the nationalisation of the big companies, the plantations and the banks, under workers' democratic control, and for the repudiation of all foreign loans. This struggle can be organised and advanced only if workers and the rural masses form their own independent action committees.

To fight for this perspective, the SEP calls for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on elected delegates from these action committees. The building of such a power centre in opposition to the Wickremesinghe government will pave the way for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies based on international socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact