

Sri Lankan plantation unions call protests amid rising anger among workers

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On September 14, Sri Lanka's plantation-based Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), suddenly held a protest to block the transport of finished tea products at 14 estates owned by the Maskeliya Plantation Company in Nuwara-Eliya district. The union's action, which continued until September 23, was for estate workers to be paid the 1,000-rupee daily wage, between two to three US dollars.

The blockade only involved local CWC leaders, the union directing workers at the estates to not to join the action. On September 23, estate management stopped assigning work to employees who were following the CWC's directives. Union officials immediately capitulated and ended their protests that day.

On September 19, the National Union of Workers (NUW) called a separate protest at the Glentilt, Brunswick, Laxapana estates in Maskeliya over the same demand. The action was limited to an hour of picketing the tea factories on those estates. Hundreds of workers joined the protests, despite not being asked to do so by the union.

Opposed to the organisation of a genuine struggle of plantation workers for higher wages and improved working conditions, the CWC and NUW actions were designed to dissipate workers anger over escalating company attacks on wages and conditions.

Following the protests, the companies paid wage arrears, calculated according to the 1,000-rupee daily wage for August. The unions cynically hailed this as a "victory," ignoring the fact that the companies should have paid 18 months of wage arrears, having been directed by the government in April 2021 to pay a 1,000-rupee daily wage.

CWC president Senthil Thondaman told the media that his union had received a letter from the company agreeing to ten demands but, in another attempt to

hoodwink workers, did not reveal what the demands were.

The plantation unions first called for a 1,000-rupee daily wage in 2015 but repeatedly betrayed workers' struggles fighting for this demand, agreeing to token wage increases.

Confronted with growing unrest among plantation workers over the surging cost of living, the former Rajapakse government issued a gazette in April 2021, directing plantation companies to pay a 1,000-rupee daily wage.

The companies refused and filed a court case against it. The court dismissed their appeal on August 9, ordering them to implement the government directive. In response, the estate companies, with the support of the unions, have driven up workloads to unbearable levels to avoid paying the full 1,000-rupee daily wage.

The daily tea leaf plucking target has been hiked to 20 kilograms per worker, up from 16 kilograms, and daily land clearing targets increased from 75 to 150 square metres. If workers cannot meet the new targets their wages are cut. For example, if an employee plucks less than 20 kilograms he or she is paid only half of their wage for the first 10 kilos, and additional amounts paid at 40 rupees per kilogram.

CWC and NUW officials called last month's protests not just in response to anger over inflation, wage cuts and unbearable working conditions, but fear over a rising rebellion of workers against the estate unions and their collaboration with the companies.

The protests were deliberately limited to prevent the broader participation of other estate workers facing the same management attacks and to send a message to the companies that their actions were only token measures.

Another significant reason why the CWC and the NUW called their protests was to counter the growing

influence of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the area. Following the initiatives of the SEP, plantation workers have begun forming independent action committees in several estates in order to defeat company attacks and fight the unions' betrayals.

Addressing a meeting in Maskeliya on September 18, CWC general secretary Jeevan Thondaman said: "Some politicians have suddenly come up country and are criticising the trade unions but not plantation companies. Some people among us have accepted their views. This situation must be changed."

While Thondaman did not directly name these "politicians," his target was the SEP, which has a long and principled history of fighting to defend the social and democratic rights of estate workers and mobilising them independently of the trade unions.

The SEP has systematically criticised and exposed the reactionary role being played by trade unions on behalf of the estate companies and capitalist state. The SEP takes seriously Thondaman's threatening comment that "this situation must be changed." We warn that the CWC may be planning a provocation against the SEP members and the estate workers who are rallying to its perspective.

In fact, on August 28, one CWC leader at Upcot, attempted a provocation against SEP members following a protest organised by the Alton and Glenugie Workers Action Committees. The protest was held to demand reinstatement of 38 sacked Alton Estate workers and for the withdrawal of frame-up court cases against them.

The Alton Estate workers were sacked in March last year during a strike action, which also involved thousands of plantation workers across the island, to demand the 1,000-rupee daily wage. The CWC collaborated directly with management and the police in the witch hunt against the Alton Estate workers, while the NUW maintained a guilty silence. The SEP is the only party that intervened to mobilise Sri Lankan workers to defend these workers.

On September 12, the SEP and the Glenugie Action Committee held a demonstration at the Glenugie Estate to protest wage cuts and new workloads. More than 75 workers participated in the action.

Estate workers, who are one of the poorest sections of the Sri Lankan working class, have been severely impacted by the surging cost of living and lower wages.

Inflation in Sri Lanka rose to 70.2 percent in August with food prices climbing by 84.6 percent. Wheat flour, the main food item used by plantation workers, has surged to 350 rupees per kilo and the price of kerosene, which is widely used by plantation workers, has increased from 87 to 320 rupees in recent months.

A daily wage of just 1,000 rupees is utterly inadequate under these conditions. Plantation workers need a monthly wage of at least 75,000 rupees (about \$US200), indexed to the rising cost of living, fully paid medical leave, pensions and decent housing.

The growing protests in the estates are part of a wave of working class struggles over wages and conditions in Sri Lanka and internationally, including in the US, UK and Europe.

Workers in the estates, and all other workplaces and institutions, can only defend their wages and basic rights by taking their struggles into their own hands. That is why the SEP urges workers to form democratically elected action committees independent of the trade unions and capitalist parties to organise unified industrial and political action.

The fight for this program can only be developed as part of a broader struggle to mobilise the entire working class on socialist policies to nationalise the banks, big companies and plantations, placing them under workers' control. Production has to be reorganised to the pressing needs of the majority of working people not the profits of the wealthy owners.

In line with this perspective, the SEP is campaigning for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of the Workers and Rural Masses attended by action committee delegates to prepare the ground for a fight for a workers' and peasants government to implement these policies.



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