

Glenugie Estate workers in Sri Lanka strike indefinitely over wages and workloads

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Workers at the Glenugie Estate at Upcot, in Sri Lanka's central plantation district, have been on indefinite strike since October 27 against speed ups and wage cuts. Around 500 workers from both the Glenugie and Deeside divisions of the estate have joined the strike.

The estate management has increased the daily quota of tea leaves plucked from 16 to 18 kilograms and doubled the area to be cleaned from 75 to 150 square metres. It is very difficult to complete the increased work targets leading to pay deductions.

The workers are demanding the targets be lowered to the previous levels, that wages not be cut when the targets cannot be met and that they be paid the 1,000-rupee daily wage. They are also protesting against the reduction of the advance paid for the Deepawali festival (a Hindu religious event) from 15,000 rupees (\$US42) to 10,000 rupees.

The plantation workers have launched this struggle under conditions where it is impossible to make ends meet because of skyrocketing prices, food shortages and meagre wages.

They have taken this action because the trade unions have betrayed several protests and strikes since early last year, when the company introduced increased workloads.

The unions involved, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the National Union of Workers (NUW), are desperately trying to end the strike.

The CWC's Hatton local leader, Pichchamuttu, phoned to demand the workers call off the strike. He said they could resolve the issues by discussing them with the state's assistant labour commissioner at Hatton. But the discussion, held on October 31, failed because the plantation managers refused to agree to the workers' demands.

Having failed to end the strike, CWC general secretary Jeevan Thondaman then told workers he would discuss and resolve the issues with the plantation managers tomorrow and advised workers to continue the strike in

the meantime. Local trade union leaders are seeking to take several workers to the promised discussion.

The CWC local leaders have erected a tent in front of the estate office, feigning sympathy for the striking employees. These are ploys to sabotage and betray the workers' struggle, when all the plantation companies are increasing work targets to unbearably high levels and cutting the wages of those who cannot meet them.

To head off growing workers' struggles and protests, the previous Sri Lankan president, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, ordered plantation companies to pay a daily wage of 1,000 rupees in April last year. The estate companies refused and went to court to challenge the government's order. Amid simmering anger among workers, the court rejected the challenge. Nevertheless, the estate companies are not paying the 1,000-rupee wage, instead implementing a wage cut by increasing the daily workloads.

For over a year, workers in the Glenugie, Alton, Talawakelle, Katukelle, Hatton Welioya and other estates have engaged in strikes and protests over this issue.

In September, the CWC called a protest campaign to block the transport of tea in 14 plantations controlled by the Maskeliya Plantation Company. The action lasted from September 14 to 23, while the CWC leaders prevented workers from engaging in any other action, promising to compel the companies to accede to their demands.

After stopping the protest campaign, the CWC claimed a victory, telling the media that the estate managers had given a written promise to pay the 1,000-rupee wage and meet other demands. That was a sheer lie. The union had simply held this so-called protest to dissipate workers' anger.

The Glenugie workers action committee vigorously campaigned to expose this latest betrayal, appealing to workers in other estates to support the strike and join a

common struggle against plantation companies' onslaught, which is backed by the government and the trade unions.

Speaking to the WSWS, striking workers explained their extremely harsh conditions, given the soaring cost of living.

"You cannot eat even one meal a day with the salary you get," one said. "It is very difficult to provide a packet of milk for children. We cannot send the children to school because the bus fares have increased, but the estate managers are cutting our salaries. They are doing this with the support of the trade unions."

Plantation workers are being made to bear the brunt of the severe global crisis that has faced the tea plantation industry since 2014, deepened by the coronavirus pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

The attack on estate workers' wages and conditions is part of the broader onslaught by the Colombo government and the capitalist class to unload the burden of the economic crisis onto the working class. President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government is unleashing the savage austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

According to the Tea Exporters Association, tea exports fell to 192.62 million kilograms in the first nine months of this year, down from 211.11 million kilograms in the corresponding period last year.

The plantation companies are seeking to offset this by imposing intensified methods of exploitation that increase productivity, including by reducing production costs through wage cuts and work speedups.

The companies insist they need a revenue-sharing scheme to overcome the crisis. Under this system, a worker would be assigned about 1,000 tea bushes. Tending the tea bushes, with the help of family members, would be the responsibility of the worker. The company would provide inputs, take the harvest, and give the worker a certain amount of income after deducting its expenses and profits.

Successive governments have supported this new exploitative scheme, proposed several years ago, and all the plantation trade unions are campaigning for it. But workers are resisting and have forced some estate managements to abandon the plan.

The repeated experience is that workers cannot win their rights through the trade unions in the estates or any other workplace. If the unions cannot prevent strikes and protests, they occasionally call them, but only to let off

steam and sabotage the opposition. They act as an industrial police force for the companies and government.

That is why the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for the organization of workers' action committees in every workplace, estate and major economic centre, independent of the trade unions, and for a united struggle.

The SEP proposes that the plantation action committees should fight for the following essential and urgently needed demands:

- No to wage cuts and workload increases! No to the revenue-sharing scheme!
- A monthly wage of 75,000 rupees for all, full pension rights, fully-paid medical leave!
- Decent houses, health and medical facilities!

The Glenugie and Alton estates workers' action committees, initiated by the SEP, are fighting for these demands. We urge workers to form such action committees in every estate.

Companies will say they cannot afford these demands and workers must toil to supply their profits. That demonstrates that workers' legitimate and long-needed rights cannot be won under the capitalist system.

The SEP explains that estate workers can defend their rights only in the broader struggle for socialist policies—including nationalising the large plantations, big companies and banks under the democratic control of the working class. All foreign debts must be repudiated.

The SEP is campaigning for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on delegates elected from action committees, to organize a unified struggle to fight for the class interests of working people. The congress provides the basis for a fight to establish a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.



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