

Reject Sri Lankan unions' attempt to end strike at Glenugie Estate!

Glenugie Estate Workers Action Committee
9 November 2022

The strike by workers of Glenugie Estate at Upcot in Nuwara Eliya district in Sri Lanka, against increased workloads and wage cuts, has reached a critical stage. The action, which began on October 27, involving some 500 workers of the Glenugie and Deeside divisions, is now entering its third week. While the estate management has rejected workers' demands, the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and the National Union of Workers (NUW) are pressuring workers to end the strike, which was begun by rank-and-file workers independently of the unions.

We, the Glenugie Estate Workers Action Committee (GEWAC), vehemently reject the unions' demand for a return to work without achieving any of our demands. The GEWAC appeals to all other plantation workers to join with Glenugie Estate workers and expand this struggle to defend our basic rights. We also appeal for support to other workers in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The Glenugie workers took strike action because our meagre wages have not kept pace with the skyrocketing cost of living, driven by shortages of food and other necessities. Working conditions are also unbearable, as is the case for all plantation workers and the working class as a whole.

Glenugie Estate's management has increased the daily plucking target for tea leaves from 16 to 18 kilograms and doubled the area that each worker must cover from 75 to 150 square metres. Workers who fail to fulfil these targets face wage cuts.

From the outset, the CWC and NUW refused to support the strike, isolated it and called for a return to work, cultivating the illusion that our demands could be achieved through discussions with management and the government's labour department. However, a meeting held on October 31 with labour officials in Hatton

failed as management rejected workers' demands.

On November 6, CWC general secretary Jeevan Thondaman informed workers that he would arrange a discussion with the Maskeliya Plantation Company, which runs the estate, on November 8 in Colombo. A delegation of workers had prepared to attend that meeting, but on November 7 the CWC Hatton local leader Pichchamuththu informed workers that the meeting was cancelled. This episode was an attempt to dupe workers and disrupt our struggle.

Pichchamuththu, Glenugie division CWC branch leader Jayaprakash, and NUW union branch leader Gnanaprahasam all continue to insist that workers must end the strike. The unions fear that the Glenugie strike will spread to other estates where workers are facing similar issues.

The unions' efforts to isolate workers have strengthened the hand of management, which is taking punitive measures. Gnanaraj, a delivery worker on the estate and a freelance media reporter, was suspended after he reported on the strike.

Workers must be warned: the record shows that the unions function not to defend our rights, but to bolster the profits of the plantation companies. Recent struggles in Glenugie, Alton, Talawakelle, Katukelle, Hatton Welioya and other estates against increasing workload, wage cuts and other attacks, have all been betrayed by the unions, including the CWC, NUW, the Up-Country People's Front and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union.

Last year the CWC and NUW betrayed the September 21-October 6 strike by 500 workers of the Glenugie and Deeside divisions against management's decision to increase the amount of tea leaves to be plucked per day from 16 to 20 kilograms. The GEWAC actively intervened in this strike, fighting to unite the

workers in opposition to the unions' sabotage.

The unions have also collaborated with management at the Alton, Katukelle, and Welioya estates in witch hunts against workers—including the suspension of dozens of workers based on bogus charges. More than one-and-a-half years later, these frame-up cases are still being dragged out.

Despite widespread opposition from workers, the unions supported the introduction of a productivity-based revenue sharing model (RSM), which allows companies to exploit the labour of not only direct employees but also their family members, including elderly people and children. Roshan Rajadurai, a spokesman for the Planters' Association of Ceylon, has told the media that plantations have increased their productivity thanks to the RSM, which contributes to around 30 percent of tea output. Workers' pension benefits, including the Employees' Provident Fund, have also been abolished.

The intensified exploitation of estate workers is a part of the broader attack on the working class internationally, which has accelerated following the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Ranil Wickremesinghe's government is carrying out brutal austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), aimed at imposing the full burden of the global capitalist crisis onto working people.

As explained by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which has taken the initiative to build plantation workers' action committees, workers cannot defend their rights through the trade unions, which are an industrial police force acting on behalf of employers and the capitalist state.

Therefore, the GEWAC appeals to all workers in the Glenugie Estate to join us and for those in other plantations to build more action committees, independent of the unions, as the basis for a unified struggle. These committees will forge links with other workers in Sri Lanka and internationally, including plantation workers in countries such as Kenya, India, Bangladesh and China.

In this struggle, the GEWAC advances the following demands:

- * No to the Revenue-Share Model
- * A monthly wage of 75,000 rupees for all, automatic wage increases according to cost of living, full pension

rights and fully-paid sick leave

- * Medical benefits for all workers and high-quality medical facilities on every estate

- * Decent, livable homes for all

- * Unconditional reinstatement of all suspended workers in the Alton, Katukelle and Walioya estates and the withdrawal of framed-up charges against them

The GEWAC agrees with the SEP that these demands are inseparable from the struggle for a workers' and farmers' government that will implement socialist policies. These include the nationalisation of large plantations, major corporations and banks, under the democratic control of the working class. All foreign debts, and the austerity demands of the IMF, must be repudiated.

We call on all workers to support the SEP's campaign for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, which will give expression to the independent political interests of the working class, as a part of the fight for socialism in Sri Lanka, South Asia and internationally.



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