

# Sri Lankan plantation workers union to join President Wickremesinghe's government

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Jeevan Thondaman, leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Sri Lanka's largest trade union of plantation workers, has informed President Wickremesinghe that the union is willing "to accept a cabinet portfolio in the government." The CWC also functions as a political party.

In an interview with the *Daily Mirror* on Thursday, Thondaman said that the CWC "feels that President Wickremesinghe can help address the issues faced by the upcountry people." The CWC's participation in the cabinet, however, would depend on the portfolio it was offered, he said.

Thondaman's announcement is a clear statement that the CWC will do whatever it can to save Sri Lankan capitalism, which is facing an unprecedented economic and political crisis. The Wickremesinghe regime is committed to imposing the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) measures and thus the burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of working people.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns plantation workers, and the working class as a whole, that the CWC will directly collaborate in the imposition of these brutal measures and the suppression of the widespread opposition of the working class and the rural masses.

While Wickremesinghe is yet to respond to Thondaman's offer, the president will reportedly induct more ministers into his cabinet in the next few days. Wickremesinghe, who will present his IMF-dictated budget to parliament on November 14, is attempting to shore up support for his unstable government.

Thondaman was the state minister of plantation infrastructure in former President Gotabaya Rajapakse's government. He resigned his ministerial position on April 4, as mass protests erupted demanding Rajapakse and his government resign.

Millions of workers, including estate workers and the rural poor, participated these nationwide struggles. While estate workers held demonstrations in Bogawantalawa, Ragala, Maskeliya and Hatton in the central tea plantation districts, the CWC maintained a guilty silence about these protests.

Rajapakse fled Sri Lanka on July 13, amid huge protests and general strikes, resigning from his post two days later. Enthusiastic about Wickremesinghe's appointment as prime minister in May by Rajapakse, Thondaman offered the CWC's "fullest cooperation."

Significantly, Thondaman has decided to join the government as widespread anger among workers, including estate workers and the poor, is mounting over the rising cost of living, shortages of essentials and looming starvation.

Thondaman and the CWC have no concern over the life and death issues faced by the estate workers, who have been hard hit by the hyperinflation and a new round of attacks on their wages and conditions.

About 500 workers in the Glenugie Estate at Upcot in the Nuwara Eliya district have been on strike since October 27 over their intolerable working conditions and wage cuts. As Thondaman is holding discussions with Wickremesinghe about saving capitalist rule, the CWC and the National Union of Workers (NUW) are working desperately to shut down the industrial action and push the strikers back to work.

In his *Daily Mirror* interview, Thondaman denounced those criticising the starvation-level wages of plantation workers, claiming: "People should know that plantation workers here are one of the highest-paid workers in Sri Lanka and in the world."

Thondaman's assertion echoes the claims of plantation companies which are violently opposed to

estate workers being paid a decent living wage. The cost of tea production is high, the companies insist, because Sri Lanka estate workers are paid more than highly exploited plantation workers in other countries. Plantation workers are one of the lowest-paid sections of the working class in Sri Lanka.

In 1948, just after independence, Tamil-Indian plantation workers' citizenship rights were abolished by the then United National Party government, as part of political strategy to divide the working class along ethnic lines. While Colombo granted citizenship rights to these estate workers in the 1980s, the Sri Lankan ruling elite still treats them as second-class citizens.

Justifying his moves to join the Wickremesinghe government, Thondaman has attempted to brush aside criticisms of the involvement of the CWC, which has held ministerial positions in previous governments. Turning history upside down, he claimed the CWC's participation was for the well-being of plantation employees.

After supporting various governments since 1948, CWC founder S. Thondaman (Jeevan's great grandfather), joined President J.R. Jayawardene's government in 1978 as its rural development minister. Acting on IMF advice, Jayawardene introduced a broad range of "open market" economic policies, and changed the constitution to give sweeping executive powers to the president.

These powers were used to impose brutal IMF attacks and crush working class opposition including a general strike by public sector workers in 1980. In 1983, the UNP launched Colombo's 26-year communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Along with the CWC, all the other estate unions—the NUW, Democratic Workers Congress (DWC), Up-country Peoples Front (UPF), and Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU)—collaborate with the bourgeois state and the plantation companies. Like every other union in Sri Lanka, the CWC supports the IMF's demands for the privatisation of government enterprises, wider taxes and cuts to the existing meagre social subsidies.

Most estate workers in Sri Lanka still live in the dilapidated line-rooms, built during the British colonial era and lacking clean drinking water, toilets and proper medical facilities. Unemployment is rampant among estate youth, with thousands forced to move to the main

cities and free trade zones or to migrate to foreign countries to secure work. These conditions are the direct responsibility of the CWC and the other plantation unions workers.

Like all other unions—in Sri Lanka and around the world—the CWC is an industrial police force that serves the interests of the companies, the government and the state.

Last year the CWC, under Jeevan Thondaman, directly worked with Alton Estate management and the police to witch hunt striking workers. Thirty-eight Alton Estate workers were victimised and sacked in March 2021 during a national strike to demand a 1,000-rupee (\$US3) daily wage. Twenty-two workers were also arrested on bogus charges, with the legal action still continuing.

The CWC's latest announcement once again demonstrates that the trade unions cannot be used as instruments of struggle by workers for their interests but are part of the capitalist system and its governments.

To defend their rights, workers need to take matters into their own hands and build their own action committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers, and completely independent of the unions and capitalist parties.

Workers at the Alton and Glenugie estates have already formed action committees. The SEP and these action committees are ready to assist workers throughout the plantations, and in other sectors, to form their own action committees. The SEP is fighting for a revolutionary perspective based on international socialism, that is, for a socialist program and for a workers' and peasants' government.



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