

# Sri Lanka: Glenugie Estate workers return after union betrays strike

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On November 14, tea plantation workers at the Glenugie Estate in Upcot, Nuwara Eliya, were compelled to end their 18-day strike, after the trade unions collaborated with management to sabotage their struggle against wage cuts and unbearable working conditions.

About 500 workers at Glenugie and its D-side division began the strike on October 27, demanding that management reverse its decision to increase workloads and cut wages. They also opposed a decision by the Maskeliya Plantation Company, which runs the estate, to slash the Deepawali festival payment to workers from 15,000 rupees (\$US41) to 10,000 rupees (\$27).

A discussion was held on November 11 involving the government's assistant labour commissioner in Hatton, the estate manager, local trade union leaders and some workers. Afterwards, union leaders told workers to return to work, saying that the manager had promised to meet all their demands.

Workers' main demands in the strike were for the daily tea plucking target of 18 kilograms to be returned to the previous 16 kilograms target, and for the daily land clearing target of 150 square metres to be reduced back to 75 square metres. Plantation management said they could pay wages of 1,000 rupees per day only if workers achieved the higher targets, otherwise their wages would be cut.

Plantation companies, with the support of the unions, are imposing these deeply exploitative conditions at every estate, along with so-called "revenue sharing models," which are designed to further erode workers' income.

According to the unions, the Glenugie Estate manager had promised to reduce the plucking target to 16 kilograms, and to pay arrears for wages lost in October under the higher target.

However, when workers went to collect their pay on the evening of November 11, they noticed that the October arrears had not been included. The manager declared that

workloads could not be reduced because the company's other estates maintain the 18 kilogram target. This position was supported by union representatives.

While workers refused to accept the wage cut and continued their strike they came under intense pressure from the unions to end it, and were finally forced to return to work on Monday because of financial hardship. Sri Lanka's unions do not provide economic assistance to sustain strikers and their families.

The Glenugie strike erupted independently of the unions, with workers showing significant militancy and determination. However, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the National Workers Union (NUW) immediately intervened to bring the industrial action under control, and deliberately worked to isolate the workers and prepare a sellout.

On October 31, union leaders held a discussion with the assistant labour commissioner and the estate manager, who flatly rejected workers' demands. On November 6, local union leaders announced that CWC General Secretary Jeevan Thondaman had arranged a meeting with management on November 8 in Colombo and wanted some workers to attend it. After a delegation of strikers had prepared to go to Colombo, however, the union informed them on November 7 that the discussion had been cancelled. These manoeuvres were designed to demoralise and disarm the workers.

Plantation workers at Glenugie and other estates must draw lessons from this betrayal.

First, workers cannot depend on the trade unions to defend even their most basic rights. The unions, in Sri Lanka and in every country, have transformed into agencies of the capitalist state and big business, and act as an industrial police force to suppress workers' struggles.

Second, militancy and determination are not enough. Workers have to take control of their own struggles by breaking from the trade unions and forming

democratically-elected action committees. These workplace committees will fight to unify plantation workers with the entire Sri Lankan working class in a common struggle.

The Glenugie Estate Workers' Action Committee (GEWAC) defended the strike and fought to expand it through the mobilisation of other workers facing similar attacks. The GEWAC issued a statement on November 10 warning of the sellout being prepared by the union.

The Glenugie strike was the latest in a series of plantation workers' struggles. Workers at Alton Estates in Maskeliya, Katukelle Estate at Talawakelle, and the Welioya Estate in Hatton recently launched strikes against increasing workloads and wage cuts.

The situation at Glenugie Estate remains extremely tense. Angry workers spoke to WSWS about the unions' betrayal and explained their difficult working and social conditions.

Janet Mary, from the D-side Estate, said: "All workers in D-side division are working eight hours but have limited daily plucking of tea leaves to less than 16 kilograms as a mark of protest. The estate manager said that 18kg must be plucked to pay 1,000 rupees. He has refused to implement the assistant labour commissioner's directive to pay the 1,000-rupee daily wage to those who are working eight hours." She warned that if management refuses to pay the 1,000- rupee wage for 16 kilos, workers will have to take action again.

Manjula, from the Glenugie division, explained the economic difficulties that forced strikers to return to the fields: "Three people in our family, myself, my husband and his sister, are working in the estate. We all live in the same house, we have five children and had to pawn all our jewelry to feed them. So we decided to return to work," she said.

The attack on wages and conditions comes at a time of soaring living costs and a nationwide food shortages. Annual inflation in Sri Lanka rose to 75 percent in October, and food prices are 102 percent higher than last year.

As the aforementioned GEWAC statement explained:

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.

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 Welioya estates and the withdrawal of framed-up charges against them.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has insisted, these demands are inseparable from the fight for a socialist program, which includes the nationalisation of large plantations, major corporations and the banks, under the democratic control of the working class. All foreign debts and the austerity demands of the IMF must be repudiated.

We urge plantation workers to join the SEP's campaign to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on workers' action committees. This will pave the way for the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government that will implement socialist policies to address the urgent needs of the population.



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