

Sri Lanka: Glenugie estate workers hostile to unions' collaboration with management

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11 December 2022

There is growing anger among workers at Maskeliya Plantations' Glenugie tea estate in Sri Lanka's central plantation district over deteriorating working conditions and the victimisation of workers by management in collaboration with the trade unions.

The daily target for plucking tea leaves has been increased to 18 kilograms, with wage cuts for workers who fail to meet it. Management has also refused to reinstate a worker who was suspended after a recent 18-day strike against the increased workload.

On December 1, about 150 workers from the D-side division of the estate went on strike demanding the immediate reinstatement of the suspended worker. Work resumed after four hours after the manager promised to "consider" the demand.

Instead of reinstating the worker, however, on December 6 management also suspended Colvin Rajh, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) branch leader at D-side division. Rajh, a plantation watcher, was accused of not reporting to work during the previous strike.

After Rajh met the estate manager, he was reinstated on December 8. As the CWC branch leader, the company relies on his services to keep workers in line. Rajh did not raise any objection to the ongoing suspension of the other two workers.

About 500 workers at the Glenugie and D-side divisions stopped work from October 27 to November 14. Their main demand was the reversal of decisions to increase the daily tea plucking target from 16 to 18 kilograms and the daily land clearing target from 75 square metres to 150. Management insisted that workers would only be paid 1,000 rupees (\$US2.72) per day if they fulfilled the new targets.

The strike was initiated by rank-and-file workers acting independently of the unions. However, the company eventually succeeded in shutting down the strike with the crucial assistance of the CWC and National Union of

Workers (NUW).

After discussions with the assistant labour commissioner in Hatton and the estate manager held on November 11, local leaders of CWC and NUW sent workers back to work, claiming that the manager had agreed to their demands.

However, when workers went to get their October wages, they realised that they had been deceived: wages had been cut in line with the new targets, which remained in place.

Workers initially refused to accept the reduced wages and attempted to continue their strike. The union leaders, however, told the workers they had no choice but to accept the new targets, since they had been implemented at the company's other estates.

Management also refused to reinstate suspended D-side division worker, Martin. Another worker, Gnanarajh who is the estate's mail delivery worker and also a freelance news reporter, had been suspended for reporting the strike and was reinstated after the strike on of November 14. But payments for traveling expenses was stopped. Martin was suspended after being accused of being a strike organiser.

The Glenugie Estate Workers' Action Committee (GEWAC), which was formed on the political initiative of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), intervened in this struggle and sought to broaden it to other sections of the working class.

It issued a statement on November 9 declaring: "We, the Glenugie Estate Workers Action Committee vehemently reject the union's 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 rights. We also appeal to all plantation workers and the workers in Sri Lanka and internationally."

The growing struggles of plantation workers are part of

the radicalisation of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally that are being driven by the soaring cost of living, wage cuts, the destruction of jobs and attacks on democratic rights.

When WSWS correspondents visited the estate, Glenugie workers detailed their conditions and condemned the unions' betrayal.

The victimised worker, Martin, who has four children, said: "I worked for three months in Colombo and returned to work in the estate [in late October] when workers were on strike. So I couldn't report to work and I also supported the strike. Management accused me of being an organiser of the strike and refused to give me work.

"My wife is working at the estate but she gets work only for 15 days per month. I had to go to Colombo to work so we could survive. We are living in poverty with the surging cost of living. The trade unions are not fighting for us. As you said, the workers must organise independently."

A female worker from the same division explained that union leaders had cheated workers: "After the discussion on November 11 they said that it [the strike] was successful and the manager agreed to our demands. We went on strike because of severe difficulties, but trade unions betrayed us."

Francis Marey, mother of four children and a worker at Glenugie division, said that the workers believed they could win their demands in the strike. "But we failed. All the trade unions betrayed us. These unions say one thing to workers and something different to management. Only the Socialist Equality Party supported us from the beginning. We appreciate that and I would like to join the action committee."

Another female worker said the housing problem on the estate was serious. "My husband's brother's family and ourselves have been living in the same room together with our children for years. The unions promised they would talk with management and arrange a separate house. A few houses were built in the estate but they were denied one, so that family has left the estate."

P. Selvaranee, a female worker at D-side, said: "When we returned after an 18-day strike the trade unions told us that if we work eight hours, the company must pay 1,000 rupees per day. But now they are demanding 18 kilograms of tea leaves a day. We have been forced to agree to that target because the unions support the management. We can't trust any trade union."

The Glenugie workers' struggle contains important lessons, not only for the workers directly involved, but for

the entire working class.

Throughout the strike, the workers demonstrated their militancy and determination to fight until their demands were met. Despite this, the unions were able to break the strike and carry out a betrayal. How did this happen?

What workers lacked was an organisation, controlled by workers themselves, to carry forward their struggle, as well as a socialist program on which to base the fight for decent living conditions and basic social and democratic rights.

The SEP is fighting to expand the GEWAC and calls on workers to build action committees in every estate, factory, and in other workplaces and neighbourhoods. As the GEWAC explained in its November 10 statement: "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."

The statement also advanced following demands for all plantation workers:

- 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, liveable 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.

These demands are inseparable from the fight for a government of workers and peasants, committed to socialist policies, including the nationalisation of all major industries, plantations, corporations and financial institutions under democratic control of workers. The SEP is fighting to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, made up of delegates from action committees of workers and rural toilers throughout the island, to spearhead the struggle for this new government, as a part of the broader fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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