

Sri Lankan plantation trade union leader elevated into cabinet

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Last week Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader Jeevan Thondaman was sworn in as a cabinet minister in President Ranil Wickremesinghe's anti-working-class government. The CWC, which is the largest plantation workers trade union, also functions as a political party.

On January 19, Wickremesinghe expanded his cabinet to 21 ministers, appointing Thondaman as water supply and estate infrastructure development minister and Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) parliamentarian Pavithra Wanniarachchi as wildlife and forest resources conservation minister. The SLPP is the main party in the ruling coalition.

On the same day, the CWC finalised an electoral seat-sharing pact with Wickremesinghe's right-wing United National Party (UNP) for the forthcoming local government elections in the Nuwaraeliya district. The UNP was totally routed in the 2019 national elections with Wickremesinghe elected as the party's only MP. The UNP hopes to garner votes in the plantation districts resting on the CWC as a political crutch.

Last November, when Thondaman was appealing to join the Wickremesinghe regime, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) issued a warning to plantation workers and the working class as a whole. It explained that the CWC was offering its direct collaboration in the imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures and the suppression of rising opposition from the working class and the rural masses.

The Wickremesinghe regime is now rapidly implementing the IMF demands, which include deep cuts in government expenditure, major income tax increases for hundreds of thousands of workers, a higher Value Added Tax (VAT), price rises for all essentials and the slashing of subsidies along with privatisations and a massive elimination of state sector jobs.

By ruthlessly squeezing the masses, Sri Lanka's ruling elite hopes to repay defaulted foreign loans, improve

conditions to boost profits for international investors and big business, and secure a \$US2.9 billion bailout loan from the IMF.

We urge plantation workers to reject the CWC and its collaboration with the UNP and Wickremesinghe's hated, repressive regime, and take matters into their own hands. The CWC's partnership is yet another exposure of the fact that this trade union, like all its counterparts, operates not to represent workers but is a privileged bureaucratic apparatus that defends the capitalist profit system.

In order to fight the government's austerity attacks, defend jobs, win decent wages indexed to inflation and improved working conditions, workers need to build their own action committees independent of the CWC and the other plantation unions. Only by establishing their own independent fighting organisations will they be able to unite with other workers in a common struggle to defend their social and democratic rights.

Last November, Thondaman voted in favour of Wickremesinghe's 2023 budget and the ruthless social attacks now being implemented. He later told CWC supporters at Kotagala near Hatton that the budget was "suitable for the current economy" and denounced workers for taking action to defend their conditions.

According to the *Daily News*, Thondaman declared, "Some people in the country are conducting agitations, while others are engaged in trade union activities... the country's economy cannot be boosted because of these agitations."

Thondaman now insists that accepting a cabinet portfolio will help "address the issues faced by the upcountry people." This is bogus. The below-poverty wages and dire social conditions facing estate workers and their families are a direct result of the trade unions' collaboration with the plantation companies and successive governments.

Jeevan Thondaman's actions, moreover, are the latest in decades of sordid moves by previous CWC leaders. In 1978, CWC founder S. Thondaman, Jeevan's great grandfather, joined President J.R. Jayawardene's government as its rural development minister. He helped implement the IMF-dictated policies of that regime and suppress workers' opposition, while backing the bloody anti-Tamil communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. In 1990–1993, he supported the privatisation of the plantations.

Following S. Thondaman's death, his grandson, Arumugam Thondaman, Jeevan's father, supported the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga. He later became a cabinet minister in President Mahinda Rajapakse's regime, and in December 2019, a cabinet minister in Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government.

Jeevan Thondaman, following father's death in May 2020, was appointed a state minister by Gotabhaya. He resigned from the government, however, in May last year amid the mass anti-government protests involving millions of workers. These actions included the participation of plantation workers in the one-day general strike on April 28. Thondaman and the CWC did not support these struggles.

Like the CWC, the other plantation unions—the National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic Workers Congress, the Up-country Peoples Front, and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union—have collaborated with previous Sri Lankan governments, functioning as industrial police for the plantation companies.

One recent notorious example saw the CWC, under Jeevan Thondaman's leadership, directly working with Alton Estate management and the police to witch hunt workers striking for higher pay.

In March 2021, 38 Alton Estate workers were victimised and sacked during national strike action by plantation workers for a 1,000-rupee daily wage. Twenty-two workers were also arrested on bogus charges while the case, almost two years later, is still unresolved because the police have not filed charges.

The CWC and the other plantation unions are also campaigning on behalf of the companies to introduce a productivity-based revenue sharing model that eliminates hard-won conditions and further intensifies the exploitation of plantation workers.

Last October, about 500 workers from the Glenugie Estate at Upcot in Nuwaraeliya district walked out on strike in protest against the intolerable working conditions created by the revenue sharing scheme. The CWC and the

NUW worked desperately to shut down the industrial action and push the strikers back to work.

The CWC and the other plantation unions are not alone. Every trade union in Sri Lanka is seeking to derail and suppress the rising working-class opposition to the government's escalating assault on wages, jobs and living conditions. Like the government and all the parliamentary opposition parties, to which they are closely connected, they fear the eruption of revolutionary struggles that challenge capitalist rule.

That is why the SEP urges workers to establish action committees independent of the unions. In the plantations, we have assisted in forming an action committee of Glenugie and Alton workers and are fighting to build similar committees in other estates. The SEP is campaigning among workers throughout the country, appealing for them to build action committees at every workplace, estate and working-class neighborhood.

At the same time, the SEP insists that there is no solution to the worsening economic and social crisis facing workers and the poor within the capitalist system. What is required are socialist policies. We call for the repudiation of all foreign debts and the nationalization of the banks, big companies, large estates and all major economic centres, under the democratic control of workers. To implement these policies involves the fight for a workers' and peasants' government.

This is connected to the SEP's fight for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates from action committees of workers and rural toilers throughout the island. Building such a strategic centre will pave the way for the working class, with the support of rural poor, to seize power as part of the broader fight for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

In the forthcoming local government elections, the SEP is fielding candidates for the Kolonnawa Urban Council in Colombo district, the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha in the Nuwaraeliya district of the central plantations, and the Karainagar Pradeshiya Sabha in Jaffna district, as part of the fight for this program. We urge workers and youth to support and participate in the SEP's campaign.



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