

Sri Lankan cinnamon farmers and workers discuss worsening social conditions

Our reporters
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Successive Sri Lankan governments have promised to boost the country's agricultural industries. Occasionally they have pledged to improve the social conditions and living standards of farmers and workers, including those involved in cinnamon cultivation. The most recent government reference to the cinnamon industry was in former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's "National Policy Framework: Vistas of Prosperity and Splendor" election manifesto in 2019.

Rajapakse's manifesto committed to expanding the cultivation and export of the popular spice with duty free imports of new extraction and packaging equipment. It also promised a technical training course at a suitable National Vocational Qualification level, the establishment of a cinnamon extraction and preparation centre for plantations of less than five acres, and new methods to use cinnamon waste products.

These pledges, like all the others made by capitalist parties during their election campaigns, were bogus and quickly forgotten. Contrary to Rajapakse's manifesto, small-scale cinnamon farmers and workers, hard hit by the rising price of fertilisers and agricultural equipment and broader cost of living increases, now confront dire socio-economic conditions.

Under the guise of promoting the use of organic fertilisers, the Rajapakse government suddenly banned chemical fertilisers and ended subsidies, leading to unaffordable increases in production costs.

In line with International Monetary Fund austerity demands, President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government decided to end all government supplies of fertiliser, placing these products, which are essential for production, entirely in the hands of private companies. This has further worsened the plight of small-scale farmers.

Sri Lanka has about 35,000 hectares of cinnamon, which are mainly grown in the Galle and Matara districts, with about 60,000 farmers and 300,000 workers earning a living from the labour intensive and low-paid industry.

While Mexico is the main market for Sri Lankan cinnamon, the popular spice is also exported to a range of countries, including the US, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Guatemala and various European nations. In 2021, Sri Lanka exported 18,813 metric tons of cinnamon, generating export earnings of \$US230 million.

Although the price of cinnamon and its related products have increased on domestic and foreign markets, farmers are deprived of the benefits because of the domination of private middlemen traders.

Higher production costs and intensifying competition from Indonesia, China and Vietnam have also pushed the Sri Lankan cinnamon industry, like tea and rubber, into crisis.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with cinnamon farmers and workers about their social conditions.

Ajantha, a small-scale farmer, said cinnamon cultivation had always been his livelihood. He owns a half an acre cinnamon plantation. "Sri Lanka supplies a big share of cinnamon products to the world market, but we do not benefit from that because the middlemen exploit us," he said.

"The cost of cinnamon cultivation has increased and it's very difficult to maintain a living on the little income we receive. A 50-kilogram bale of fertiliser used to cost 1,200 rupees (\$US3.70) but is now 12,500 rupees. I need about two and a half bales of fertiliser at a time for cultivation.

"This means that the income I receive for the cinnamon is insufficient to cover family expenses. I

spend over 35,000 rupees monthly on food and 30,000 rupees for the education of my kids. When I'm not working on my land, I need to get informal employment as a hired worker. We used to have two curries for a meal, now we can only afford to have one," he said.

While cinnamon bark is a popular spice—Sri Lanka produces the highest quality product in the world—cinnamon leaves are widely used as a raw material in the production of perfumes and medicines. A kilogram of cinnamon bark in Sri Lanka is 3,700 rupees compared to \$US30 (10,000 rupees) a kilo on the world market.

Sumit, 49, lives in Dehigahawela village, about 100 km south of Colombo. His wife works in the Middle East to supplement the family income. The couple have one child.

"I went to school up to the ordinary level [Grade 11] but because of economic difficulties also worked in the cinnamon plantations with my parents during this time. After completing my schooling, I continued as a cinnamon worker," he said.

"When I have work, I get about three or four thousand rupees per day. There are periods, however, when there are no orders for cinnamon and it's sold at a low price so I don't get any income.

"The new year is approaching [April is a traditional festival season for Sinhalese and Tamils] and so everybody is selling cinnamon at a cheap price because they need money to buy things for their children. The salary I get during this time is low and there are many days without any work. And when the harvest is lower, our incomes will decline because we are only paid for two-fifths of the harvest," he said.

Manjula, 48, who is married with two children, lives in Iluppitiya village in the Galle district.

"I only went to the ordinary level at school and my wife does not have a job. In addition to housework, she helps me with my own work. I worked in the cinnamon plantations with my parents during my schooling and so I got used to this job, which is the main employment in this area," he explained.

"Cinnamon is not being processed at the moment so that's why I go to work in other gardens. I earn about 2,500 rupees a day, but household expenses are very high and after I pay for extra education classes for my children, there's no money for anything else.

"The government keeps increasing electricity bills and the cost of food, but our salaries remain the same. The government does not provide any solution for our issues while the middlemen exploit the workers as they see fit and they become richer," he said.

Referring to the IMF's \$2.9 billion bailout loan, he said: "Everyone is talking about this loan but even our children will have to pay it. When Gotabhaya [Rajapakse] was president we suffered endlessly but now the new government boasts about how Ranil [Wickremesinghe] got a loan. The government is selling state-owned property. I do not know what the consequences of this will be, but I have no faith in what [JVP leader] Anura Kumara [Disanayake] says. We know their history," he said.

"I like the idea of a workers' party coming to power. We don't have to be slaves all the time, but we need a program to prevent this fate so I would like to discuss further."

Last September a group of small-production cinnamon farmers and workers in the Galle district formed an action committee under the political guidance of the Socialist Equality Party. Action committee members are taking steps to expand its membership and take forward the fight for their rights by uniting with the other workers and rural poor farmers coming into struggle against the Wickremesinghe government's social attacks.



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