

Hayleys Plantations in Sri Lanka uses competition to drive up workloads

M. Thevarajah and G. Devakumar
21 May 2023

On February 27, Hayleys Plantations held its 2023 “Best Tea Harvester” (BTH) competition at Radella ground, Talawakelle, in the Nuwara Eliya district. It was the company’s second BTH annual competition. Forty-four women workers from the Kelani Valley Plantations, Talawakelle Tea Estate and Horana Plantations, which are owned and operated by the Hayleys Company, participated.

The purpose of the event is not to celebrate the incredible skills of these low-paid workers but is part of an ongoing propaganda campaign by Hayleys and other plantation companies to drive up productivity and impose the brutally exploitative “revenue share system.” Local trade union leaders from the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and National Union of Workers (NUW) supported and helped organise the BTH event.

Competitors were given a 20-minute time span to pluck the tea leaves. The winner, R. Seethayammah from the Somerset estate of Talawakelle Tea Estates, won the best harvester prize after she plucked 10.42 kilograms in the allocated time. She was awarded 400,000 rupees (\$US1,288.77) and a gold medal.

Addressing the award ceremony, Roshan Rajadurai, Hayleys Plantations’ managing director and spokesman for the Sri Lanka Planters Association, declared that the company’s vision was to build a tea industry “around employees’ needs and aspirations.” The Best Tea Harvester competition, he added, “is part of a series of structured programs we conduct to recognise, support and encourage the hard work of our people.”

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters visited the Somerset Estate last week as part of the campaign being conducted by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) for the establishment of workers’ action committees.

The SEP is explaining to workers that the trade unions have been transformed into tools of big business and the capitalist state. To defeat the government and employers’ attacks on wages and social conditions, workers must take matters into their own hands by forming independent action committees. Employees at Alton and Glenugie estates have

already taken up this initiative and formed their own plantation workers’ action committee.

Somerset workers spoke to WSWS reporters about their working and living conditions and the BTH competition. They said that the competition was a “showpiece” and used to cover up the real situation facing plantation workers and their families.

Workers explained that the two-hectare piece of land used for the competition was very fertile and had been especially prepared for the competition. It was held during a particularly favourable time of the season, with good harvests in most plantation districts.

“Other parts of the estate are not so fertile. During the dry season, or a season with heavy rains, you cannot even reach the [required] daily 20-kilogram target,” one employee said.

Addressing the BTH competition, Hayleys Plantations managing director Rajadurai declared: “We are also providing a healthy living environment while ensuring access to quality health and nutrition, while empowering the community and its youth.”

This is a total lie. The working and social conditions in the estates run by Hayleys Plantations, one of Sri Lanka’s largest agribusinesses with 44 tea and rubber estates, are harsh and no different from other plantations in Sri Lanka.

The majority of the Hayleys estate workers live in nearly century-old 10-foot by 12-foot line rooms, most of them in dilapidated condition. While some workers have renovated or made extensions to their homes, this was only made possible by using money from their pension fund or money provided by estate youth working outside the estates, including in Colombo or other cities.

The estate line-rooms have no proper facilities such as clean drinking water and sanitation. The education services for children on the plantations is of poor quality. Below-poverty wages and the lack of alternative employment force estate youth to migrate to Sri Lanka’s main cities and free trade zones, or overseas for jobs.

The many Somerset estate workers who spoke with the WSWS bluntly rejected Rajadurai’s claims that his company

has taken steps to improve their conditions.

“Estate management cuts our wage if we are unable to reach their production targets and then they cheat us when weighing our harvest. Plucked tea leaves are weighed three times a day, for example, which means it is reduced by two kilos due to moisture loss. Now they use digital weighing machines, instead of manual ones, so we can’t read the new digital machines. We don’t know how many kilos they’re stealing from us every day,” one worker said.

R. Seethayammah, who won this year’s BTH medal, said she is only able to pluck around 20 to 22 kilograms during her daily work, like her colleagues. Higher quantities can only be harvested during the good seasons, she continued, adding that clearing estate land is now a problem because of shortages of male workers and youth who have migrated to Colombo looking for jobs.

A retired plantation worker said: “It was very difficult when we were working in previous seasons to reach a daily target of 20 kilograms. There were some seasons when you couldn’t even pluck three kilograms a day, but in those days you were paid a full wage. Even then, however, our earnings were not enough to pay our daily expenses. After companies took over the estates, the situation further deteriorated.”

Referring to Sri Lanka’s soaring inflation rates and the high cost of living, the retired worker explained that the official 1,000-rupee daily wage is barely enough for three meals a day. “We can’t think about eating meat, fish or eggs but how we are supposed to get sufficient energy to work? In our division about 30 workers are living in temporary shelters.”

In April 2021, the former government President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, confronted with rising strikes and protests by plantation workers, issued a gazette directing plantation companies to pay a 1,000-rupee daily wage. Rajapakse hoped it would placate the mass unrest amongst plantation workers. The plantation bosses, however, opposed this meagre increase.

Determined to drive up productivity and exploitation, the plantation companies now want the “revenue share system” imposed across the entire sector.

This is supported by the Wickremesinghe government and all the trade unions in the plantation sector—the CWC, NUW, Democratic Workers Front, Upcountry People’s Front, the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Committee.

Under this system, a plot of land with about 1,000 or more tea bushes is assigned to a worker, who, with the support of their family, must maintain the plot. This means clearing the land, planting tea bushes, applying weedicide and fertiliser, and harvesting the crop. They have no legal right to this land.

The company, which only provides fertiliser, agrichemicals and equipment, purchases the harvested tea leaves at 40 to 50 rupees a kilogram. Workers are paid after the company has deducted the cost of its supplies. While outside buyers can pay a higher per kilo price for the tea, workers have no right to sell their harvest. In other words, estate workers are transformed into modern-day sharecroppers.

The Hayleys Plantations website states that it has a total of 207.7 hectares, divided amongst 605 separate workers, under contract using this ruthlessly exploitative system in the estates it runs. In 2022, Hayleys Plantations increased the annual after-tax profits on its estates by 69 percent to 2.62 billion rupees (\$US8.60 million). This has been achieved by driving up workloads and cutting wages by imposing unreachable daily production targets.

Somerset workers told the WSWS that the trade unions were “dead” and did not fight for workers’ rights but supported management. “Every local trade union leader has a telephone facility so that he can directly connect to the manager. Employees are being persuaded to work according to the manager’s instructions,” one worker said.

Plantation management has unleashed savage repression against workers at its Alton Estate, situated near Maskeliya. In April 2021, Hayleys-owned Horana Plantations sacked 38 of its workers after they struck to demand a 1,000-rupee daily wage and in opposition to the management harassment of protesting workers. Twenty-two of these workers and two estate youth were arrested by the police, in collaboration with an estate manager who falsely claimed workers had physically assaulted him.

The court case has dragged on for over two years because the police have failed to submit charges against these workers. Having lost their jobs, the sacked plantation workers face dire poverty. The CWC directly collaborated with the police in this witch hunt while all the other plantation trade unions have refused to lift a finger to defend the victimised workers.

The Alton estate plantation workers’ action committee, which was formed in April 2021, and the SEP are the only organisations demanding the immediate withdrawal of the bogus charges and the unconditional reinstatement of the sacked employees.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact