

Sri Lanka: Plantation unions promote reactionary identity politics at Malaiyham 200 conference

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The Malaiyham 200 conference was held last month in Nuwara Eliya in central Sri Lanka to mark 200 years since Tamil workers were brought from southern India as indentured labour for the tea plantations established under British colonial rule. Two centuries on, the hundreds of thousands of plantation workers, known as Indian Tamils or up-country Tamils, remain one of the most impoverished and oppressed sections of the working class.

The conference did not, however, focus on the appalling conditions facing plantation workers and their families who labour long hours for low pay, live in small line rooms without basic facilities and lack access to proper health and education services. Rather it was to promote the demands of a privileged layer that dominate the trade unions/political parties that are responsible for suppressing the struggles of plantation workers for their democratic and social rights.

Parliamentarian Mano Ganesan, leader of the Democratic People's Front (DPF), summed up the theme of the conference when he declared: "Now we have come out [of] the confines of the plantation workers and transformed into a nation." He speaks for the DPF and other trade union apparatuses who want greater official recognition as "leaders" of up-country Tamils and greater power and privileges for themselves.

The conference declaration urged the government to recognise "Malaiyham Tamizhar [up-country Tamils] as a community with distinct identity and as equal citizens." It listed 13 demands for the up-country Tamil community, including to ensure political power sharing, land rights and to recognize all human settlements in the plantations as fully-fledged villages.

Like all identity politics, the promotion of a "distinct identity," even nationhood for plantation workers only serves to elevate race, religion and language above the primary division in capitalist society, namely class. As such, it is utterly reactionary as it only serves to divide the hundreds of thousands of plantation workers from their class brothers and sisters in other "communities"—Sinhala, Muslim and the Tamils of the North and East who trace their history on the island back centuries.

The call for "power-sharing" is to boost the position of the up-country Tamil elite—politicians, union bureaucrats, small businessmen, professionals and academics—at the expense of the mass of plantation workers. In particular, it is designed to reinforce the political stranglehold of the DPF and other plantation unions over "their" workers, right at the point when the working class as a whole is entering struggle against soaring inflation, job losses and the IMF's austerity agenda being implemented by the government.

The conference was organised by the Institute of Social Development (ISD), a non-government organisation, which receives foreign funds including from the United States' Agency for International Development (USAID).

USAID Acting Mission Director in Sri Lanka Debra Mosel participated in the event and joined the chorus in declaring that Malaiyaha Tamils "have persisted in building a community with the distinct identity rooted in the hills of this country." USAID Facebook page says: "The US backs the community's push for equal rights."

USAID's presence at the conference only underscores its class character. It was not there to defend the basic democratic rights of plantations workers, but to support the "rights" of the trade unions that have been instrumental in suppressing their struggles.

The role of the unions was underscored by the fact that a prominent invitee to the conference was the Sri Lanka Plantation Association, the representative body of Regional Plantation Companies. By contrast, there were only a small number of plantation workers in the audience.

Ganesan is not only head of the DPF but of the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA) formed in 2015 with two other plantation-based trade unions—the National Union of Workers (NUW) and Up-country Peoples' Front (UPF). NUW leader P. Digambaram and UPF leader V. Radhakrishnan, who are also parliamentarians, are its deputy leaders and were among the speakers at the conference.

The TPA claims to represent the 1.5 million, mostly Indian, Tamils living outside the Northern and Eastern provinces. The TPA is registered as a political party and currently controls six divisional councils (local governments) in the plantation areas.

Last year the TPA published an "Aspirational Document" calling for the establishment of a Non-Territorial Community Council (NTCC), to be enshrined in law. This elite body would not be elected, but rather would comprise legislators elected/nominated to parliament, provincial councils and local government bodies, for Sri Lanka's Indian Tamil community.

Speaking to the *Daily Mirror* column last month, Ganesan said President Ranil Wickremesinghe had repeatedly said that "Hill Country Tamils are a unique ethnic community." Ganesan then added: "It has now grown beyond the old 'plantation worker' identity. We are one of the four national ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, along with Sinhalese, NE [north and east] Tamils and Muslims."

According to Ganesan, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the largest and most longstanding plantation trade union with its history of betraying plantation workers, also favours the promotion of Indian Tamils as a distinct national ethnic community. The CWC is currently a partner in the Wickremesinghe regime that is imposing the IMF's demands.

The aim of this divisive identity politics is not just to secure privileges for the elite but stems from a deep-seated fear throughout the ruling class of a unified anti-capitalist movement of the working class, including the large battalions of plantation workers.

Plantation workers have a rich history of struggle together with other sections of the working class in Sri Lanka. During World War II, the

plantation workers, together with other sections of the working class throughout the island, launched struggles under the leadership of the Trotskyist movement that challenged the British colonial rule.

Ever since formal independence from Britain in 1948, successive governments have promoted Sinhala Buddhist supremacism and anti-Tamil, anti-Muslim chauvinism as a means of dividing the working class. One of the first acts of the United National Party (UNP) government was to introduce legislation that stripped a million Indian Tamil plantation workers of their citizenship rights.

Leader of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India—then a section of the Fourth International—Colvin R. De Silva, denounced the reactionary Citizenship Act in the parliament in August 1948, saying:

“If this Government approaches this question from the angle of the capitalist class, our party—we of the Fourth International—approach this question from the angle of the proletariat—the working class. That is to say, we approach it from a class angle independent of racial questions and above racial questions. We are not ready as amongst the labouring population of this country to distinguish between man and man on the ground of his racial origin. We say a worker is, first and foremost, a worker.”

In subsequent decades, plantation workers engaged in class battles together with their counterparts in other sectors that sent shock waves through the ruling class which each time reacted by whipping up Sinhala chauvinism.

In 1953, plantation workers joined the semi-insurrectional Hartal that brought the working class and rural poor into bitter conflict with the UNP government that was presiding over devastating inflation. Sections of the ruling class rallied behind the newly-formed Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its Sinhala-only language policy that relegated all Tamil speakers to the status of second class citizens.

Plantation workers also played a prominent role in the powerful “21 demands” movement in 1963 that rocked the SLFP government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike to the core. The government only survived when the degenerated Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which still claimed to be Trotskyist, joined the government in 1964. In openly abandoning socialist internationalism, the LSSP embraced the Sinhala communalist policies of the SLFP.

The LSSP’s betrayal created great confusion in the working class and opened the door for the emergence of petty bourgeois communal parties, ultimately leading to a three-decade long communal war in 1983 that devastated the island. In the plantations, the LSSP’s embrace of anti-Tamil policies enabled the CWC and its breakaway factions to consolidate their political domination over plantation workers.

Several speakers at last month’s Malaiyaham 200 referred to 1964 Sirima-Shastri Pact between Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Prime Minister Bandaranaike to forcefully repatriate over half a million plantation workers to south India.

The LSSP not only supported this reactionary communal measure, but as part of the second SLFP-led government of 1970-77 was instrumental in its implementation. It is a measure of the LSSP’s political degeneration that Colvin R de Silva, who had opposed the Citizenship Act in 1948, was the plantation minister who presided over the widespread hunger and famine in the plantations that drove hundreds of thousands of Tamils back to southern India.

Significantly, Ganesan and other speakers at the Nuwara Eliya conference criticized the Sirima-Shastri pact not from the standpoint of the rights of plantation workers, but rather because it limited the number of parliamentary seats for the plantation unions. If not for the pact, Ganesan complained, and the repatriation of plantation workers, his DFP and other unions would have 20 seats and be in a strong position to bargain with the Colombo government for more privileges and ministerial posts.

It should be noted that Ganesan is currently an MP for the main opposition party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), formed in 2020 when the overwhelming majority broke from the UNP leaving Ranil Wickremesinghe as its only MP. The SJB leaders, just as much as Wickremesinghe, are steeped in the UNP’s criminal history—including the Citizenship Act and its instigation of the protracted civil war that engulfed the island. Ganesan’s DPF was part of the 2015-2019 UNP-led government in which he was a minister.

Even though plantation workers were granted citizenship rights in the mid-1980s to quell their developing opposition, they are still being discriminated against as second-class citizens. They have been particularly hard hit by the current social crisis. Unemployment is high forcing thousands of youth to move to the cities and free trade zones in search of a job. Hunger and malnutrition are becoming widespread as many families cannot afford to buy enough food.

Last year plantation workers joined the popular uprising provoked by the social crisis that ousted the government of president Gotabhaya Rajapakse. They overwhelmingly joined the general strike on April 28 and partially joined the general strike on May 6, even after the unions opposed their participation. By limiting any action, the plantation unions along with the rest of the trade unions enabled the anti-democratic installation of Wickremesinghe as president.

The Wickremesinghe government is now deepening the attacks on the social and democratic rights of the entire working class as it imposes the new burdens of the IMF austerity program. Whatever their tactical differences, the opposition parties and all the trade unions back the IMF agenda promoting the lie that there is no alternative. In the plantations, the unions are working arm in arm with the plantation companies and government to suppress any struggle for wages and decent living conditions.

Facing widespread opposition from workers, the unions and the political establishment as a whole are again resorting to the political poison of communalism. That was the agenda of the Malaiyaham 200 conference. Plantation workers should reject the reactionary notion that they are part of a separate Indian Tamil “nation” that has its own “distinct identity” and unify with the rest of the working class across the island and globally to fight the ruthless austerity measures.

Workers can only wage a political and industrial struggle if they take matters into their own hands and establish action committees independent of the treacherous trade unions and all bourgeois parties. It is false that there is no alternative to the IMF’s austerity policies. What is required is a unified working class drawing to its side the rural masses on the basis of a socialist program to abolish the capitalist system which is the root cause of the present economic and social crisis.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses comprising democratically-elected representatives of these action committees to spearhead the struggle to overthrow the repressive capitalist government and establish a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies. Plantation workers are an integral part of this independent political movement along with their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka and beyond.



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