

Sri Lanka: Ramboda Estate workers continue 10-week strike

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Sixty-five workers from Ramboda Estate's RB division at Kotmale in the Nuwara- Eliya district have been on strike since May 16 to demand that their employer deposit required funds into their pension accounts, which are maintained by the Central Bank.

The strikers allege that the owner of the estate has not deposited the legally required payments and that workers will not receive their pensions when they retire.

The workers' pension fund includes two categories. The Employees Provident Fund (EPF) is a shared pension system with contributions from employers and employees. Employees' contributions are a percentage of their salaries and comes from their monthly wage. The other category is the Employees Trust Fund scheme which the employer contributes to.

Strikers say that their employer has not deposited any money into these pension funds for years even though the workers' contribution is automatically deducted from their monthly income.

The workers launched this struggle independently of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Sri Lanka's main plantation union, which has a branch on the estate. While the CWC has completely abandoned these workers, the strikers are determined to continue their action until their demands are met.

RB is one of the four divisions of the Ramboda Estate. The others are Bloomfield, New Division and Fifty-Acres with a total of around 300 workers employed across the whole estate, which is privately owned by Gandhi Soundararajan. Soundararajan works at Malayaha [Up-country] Development Authority and is also the official CWC representative at the estate. He is related to the Thondaman family, which has controlled the CWC for six decades. The current CWC leader is Jeevan Thondaman, who is also the

Wickremesinghe government's minister of estate infrastructure and water supply.

RB division workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that the estate's ownership has changed several time since 1991 when the state-owned plantation was leased out to private companies. All owners were close relatives of the Thondaman family. Sundararajan assumed ownership of the estate in 2017.

As several workers explained: "All the rights we previously enjoyed have one by one been removed by management since 1991. The estate dispensary was closed and now it's even very difficult to obtain a letter from the management confirming our residency [on the estate]."

They said that work schedules have been reduced to three days per week and employees must pluck 20 kilograms of tea leaves per day to receive the 1,000-rupee daily wage. The estate has not been properly maintained and looks like a forest. The land is not being cleared, agrochemicals not applied, and the estate's infrastructure is completely dilapidated.

"How can we pluck 20 kilograms per day in this situation? Our monthly average wage is less than 10,000 rupees (\$US30) and it's not even paid on the due date which is the 10th of every month. Paying our wage is delayed for days," one worker told the WSWS.

While workers have protested against these attacks since 1991, including several month-long strikes over the non-payment of pension funds, these struggles were betrayed by the CWC, in collaboration with management.

Another worker said: "We been on strike for nearly three months. Our children tell us that they are not ready to live as slaves under the estate management and they are ready to fight with us. This time we not going to abandon our struggle until we win our demand."

Estate management has attempted to sabotage the strike from the outset, threatening workers with dismissal. On June 12, management sent 39 strikers registered letters declaring that if they did not end the strike they would be deemed to have “voluntarily abandoned” their jobs.

On June 21, they received another letter ordering them to report to work. After workers rejected management’s threats and resolved to continue their struggle, they were sent a third letter ordering them to vacate their estate line rooms.

Estate owner Soundararajan recently visited the estate accompanied by members of Special Task Force (STF) police officers. He falsely promised strikers that he would resolve the issue within three weeks and told them to return to work. Workers refused, telling him that they would not return to work until he resolved the problem. While maintaining their industrial action, the strikers are working outside the estate to earn a living.

K. Saraswathie showed her EPF receipt to WSWs reporters. “I’ve been working here 28 years but there’s only 60,000 rupees in my EPF account. The EPF money deducted from my wage has not even been sent to the Central Bank,” she said.

“We are living in homes that are like cow sheds. We have to walk through crossroads and steps that are completely damaged and it’s very dangerous to reach the tea fields.

“There are leeches, leopards, snakes and wild pigs that attack us. The trade union is not concerned about any of our problems but is supporting management,” she added.

The problems described by Saraswathie are faced by thousands of plantation workers. This will intensify as the government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe brutally imposes the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan workers are threatened with job destruction, increased workloads, and attacks on their pensions.

The Wickremesinghe government is moving to restructure 22 regional plantation companies (RPC) as part of its privatisation and restructuring of hundreds of state enterprises. This includes the closure of “unprofitable” estates, the cultivation of alternative commercial crops and the establishment tourist facilities in plantations.

The RPCs has also introduced various methods to increase productivity and cut wages, including the highly exploitative revenue-share system, new technology such as tea plucking machines, and systematic increases in workloads.

The CWC and all other plantation unions, including the National Workers Union, Democratic Workers Congress and the Upcountry People’s Front have refused to defend estate workers’ rights. Instead, they are deepening their collaboration with the plantation companies and the government against the workers.

The brutal attacks on Ramboda Estate workers since 1991 are yet another confirmation for plantation workers and every section of the working class that they cannot defend their jobs and basic rights through the trade unions which defend the profit system.

Workers need alternative organisations, workers’ action committees independent of the trade union bureaucracy that collaborates with employers and capitalist governments. The workers at Alton and Glenugie estates in Maskeliya have already formed such committees.

We urge Ramboda Estate workers, who have defied the trade union’s call to return to work and rejected their employer’s threats, to step forward and build their own action committee. This will enable them to unite with their class brothers and sisters in other plantations and industrial sectors to fight against employers attacks on their living conditions and social and democratic rights.

At the same time, we urge workers in other plantations to come to the assistance of striking Ramboda Estate workers by organising actions in their areas and building their own action committees.



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