

Drought-affected small farmers in Sri Lanka denounce government indifference

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Over 171,000 people lack drinking water due to a major drought that has hit 10 districts in Sri Lanka, including Ratnapura, Hambantota, Ampara, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura and Kurunegala. Approximately 50,000 rural farming families, including 30,000 in Udawalawa and Embilipitiya in Ratnapura and Ambalantota, are facing the destruction of their crops due to water shortages.

Last week, *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters visited Mayurapura, Baragama, Upper Baragama, Ballagaswewa and parts of Randiyagama in Ambalantota about 261 kilometres south of Colombo to discuss the harsh economic and social conditions now confronting farmers.

The Mahaweli Development Authority (MDA) leases land to small farmers, with about one hectare of paddy land and a tiny area for their homes. Big farmers are provided with between 20 and 40 hectares of land. The small farmers complained that the MDA gives the larger farmers priority in supplying water and other basic needs.

Many of the small farmers live in dwellings with one or two small rooms and a kitchen. Some are constructed from cement bricks with tin roofs, others are mud huts roofed with coconut leaves. While they have piped water, there are no decent education or health facilities.

At Mahaara village, in Mayurapura, there is only one school that has classes up to university entrance level. Many students have to walk two or three kilometres to reach the facility. The nearest hospitals are 10 or 15 kilometres away in Ambalantota or Hambantota. Those needing emergency treatment must hire taxis for 1,500 to 2,000 rupees (\$US4.60 to \$US6.20) to reach a hospital.

The farmers explained to WSWS reporters that half their paddy cultivation had been destroyed by the drought. They have abandoned it for buffaloes to eat. They are now making desperate attempts to save their other crops by pumping water from six-metre wells they have been forced to dig.

Nelum Chintaka from Randiyagama is a father of two. He said that he worked in a motor-vehicle garage after he finished his schooling, and then turned to farming. “I have spent 150,000 (\$US460) rupees to cultivate this one hectare piece of land. This includes 60,000 rupees borrowed at 10 percent

interest,” he said.

“The current water crisis has been created by government bureaucrats. During last season it cost about 40,000 rupees for a 50-kilo bundle of urea fertiliser. It now costs about 9,000 rupees but the paddy cultivation has been destroyed by lack of water. Yesterday, in order to try and save my other crops, I had to dig a well, but this will only be enough for four or five days,” he explained.

Upul, 38, and a father of four, has cultivated just over half a hectare of paddy. “I got a 200,000 rupee bank loan but because they don’t give loans for farming, I took it out as a housing loan. The monthly instalment is 3,500 rupees but I still haven’t been paid for this month,” he said.

“Last time we used organic fertilisers distributed by the government and had to use twice the amount of weedicide agrochemicals because of that. Everything is expensive and now there are frequent droughts but never any permanent solutions.”

Dilan Chaturanga, 32, explained that he has been farming and raising cattle since he was 18. “I have 10 cows but about 15,000 rupees are needed for each cow per year just for medicine. So it is difficult to do cattle raising now. Every government has cheated the farmers and none of what was promised during the elections has happened. We are living with increasing difficulties,” he said.

“We want a permanent solution to our problems but, as you say, this cannot be expected under capitalist governments. We must think of other ways to solve our problems. I agree with you that workers and farmers must unite and organise a common struggle for our rights.”

Anura, 38, has cultivated one hectare of bananas. “I have already spent more than 400,000 rupees on this, but maintenance of banana plants is very difficult because of the drought. I’ve cultivated half an acre of paddy for the family’s food but everything has been destroyed,” he explained.

“If a deep tube well is dug then this crop can be saved to some extent but it costs a lot of money and the government will not do this. We can never expect any permanent solutions from

these governments.”

On July 24, hundreds of farmers from the Udawalawa area began a *satyagraha* or sit-down strike in Embilipitiya town to demand urgently needed water releases. The protest was organised by the All Ceylon Farmer’s Federation (ACFF) which is led by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The destruction of crops in these areas is primarily due to reduced water levels in the Udawalawa Reservoir and the failure of government authorities to organise timely releases of water to it from the Samanalawewa Reservoir.

The Wickremesinghe government rejected the farmers’ demands for water releases. On August 1, Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera declared that this would disrupt electricity generation at Samanalawewa Reservoir and cause daily four-hour power cuts in the Galle, Matara, Hambantota, Kegalle and Ratnapura areas.

On August 7, a group of protesting farmers attempted to enter the Samanalawewa Reservoir aiming to force officials to open the hydro-mechanical gate to release water to Udawalwa Reservoir. The farmers complained that half of their paddy cultivation had already been destroyed and that if sufficient water was not made available, the rest of their crop would be destroyed. They were stopped by the police who erected barricades and threatened to arrest them.

Cabinet spokesman Bandula Gunawardena denounced the protesters, claiming their actions were part of a conspiracy against the government. The National Intelligence Service, he told the media, “has reported to the President that some people are trying to use the anger of the farmers to create a mass struggle like May 9 again.” This was a reference to last year’s mass uprising that ousted former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

The next day, however, the government, fearful that the Udawalawa farmers’ agitation could spread to other farming communities across the island, decided on a three-day water release to Udawalawa Reservoir. This followed the Sri Lankan Human Rights Commission issuing an order to the government to release water for the Udawalawa farmers. The ACFF seized on the government’s decision and on August 10 used it to call off the protest.

Addressing the farmers, ACFF national organiser Namal Karunartne declared: “The government has bowed down to the farmers’ struggle. The Human Rights Commission ordered the government to give water and we respect the order of the Human Rights Commission.”

On August 11, however, water authorities announced a reduction in the amount of water being released from Samanalawewa Reservoir, claiming it would impact on power generation.

From the outset, the ACFF’s aim was not to mobilise farmers in a joint struggle against the government. Like the JVP, it has no fundamental differences with the International Monetary

Fund (IMF) measures being imposed by the Wickremesinghe government, which are now throwing millions of workers and the rural poor into even deeper poverty.

The ACFF’s real aim is to dissipate the rising anger of rural farmers and tie it to the JVP-led National People’s Power (NPP) coalition and its hope to form a government in a future election. Any future JVP-NPP administration would implement the same IMF-dictated attacks.

In May 2021, the former Rajapakse government banned chemical fertilisers and slashed fertiliser subsidies with devastating impacts on rural farmers. Tens of thousands of farmers across the country responded with protests that continued for months. They joined with the mass demonstrations against the Rajapakse government in April to July over the rising cost of living and shortage of essentials.

The Wickremesinghe government, which replaced the Rajapakse regime, has resolved none of the issues facing the working class and rural masses. Instead it has intensified the social attacks demanded by the IMF, international and national big businesses.

Sri Lankan small farmers and rural toilers have faced decades of poverty and indebtedness. None of these social issues, however, can be solved without breaking the grip of the major agriculture companies and the capitalist banking system that keeps them indebted. Only through the nationalisation of the large estates, the giant agribusinesses and the banks and their placement under workers’ control can farmers be given low interest rate loans and guaranteed decent prices for their crops. This would include the distribution of fertiliser and other essential agricultural inputs.

In order to fight for their basic needs, poor farmers need to break from all the capitalist parties, and their farmer affiliated organisations, and establish their own independent action committees. This means joining the campaign being waged by the Socialist Equality Party for a Socialist and Democratic Congress of Workers and Rural Masses.

Such a congress will be based on independent action committees of workers and poor farmers, and aimed at spearheading the struggle for a government of workers and peasants to implement socialist policies, as a part of broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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