

# Sri Lankan president unveils plans to intensify exploitation of plantation workers

**W.A. Sunil****22 November 2023**

In early November, We200 was held in Colombo to mark the bicentenary of the bringing of indentured Tamil workers from southern India to labour in Sri Lanka's plantations. The event was organised by the Water Supply and Estate Infrastructure Minister, Jeevan Thondaman, who is also the leader of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union. Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman was the chief guest.

Around 5,000 people, including many CWC officials, participated in the event on November 2. Cultural shows were also organised. Every attempt was made to paint the ceremonies as sympathetic to workers.

After Sitharaman made her remarks, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe outlined the far reaching plans of his government to restructure the plantations and deepen the exploitation of workers.

Hundreds of thousands of impoverished Tamils were brought to the British colony of Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known, starting from 1823, to toil in the plantations in the island's central hill area. Ravaged by famine and rampant unemployment, South India provided a cheap labour pool for British planters.

Currently, there are 115,000 active labourers in the plantations with more than 800,000 family members. It is one of the largest workforces in the country in a single industry and among the lowest paid, poorest sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

Plantation workers and their families still live in barracks-style line rooms, many around 100 years old. Their living conditions have not improved since the end of British colonial rule and so-called independence in 1948. Instead, their citizenship rights were abolished in the same year by the United National Party government. Decades later, after many had been forced to return to India, their citizenship rights were restored but the ruling elite still treats them as second class citizens.

The We200 event was organised amid widespread anger among estate workers over low wages and unbearable social conditions including the failure of the government and

plantation companies to provide adequate housing, health and education facilities. The plantation trade unions, which also function as political parties, such as the CWC, act as the direct tools of the companies and government.

Indian Finance Minister Sitharaman lamented the hardships facing Tamils brought to Sri Lanka, cynically hailed their "contributions to the Sri Lankan economy" and talked about the need to uplift their lives.

Sitharaman said that the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi government had allocated funds for a project to construct 10,000 houses for estate workers and to improve their educational and infrastructure facilities. Previously, India funded the building of 10,000 houses but they were small and inadequate for decent living.

The Modi government has no concern about poverty-stricken Tamils in Sri Lanka but is driven by other considerations. It wants to develop close relations with CWC and other plantation union bureaucracies to pressure Colombo in line with New Delhi's strategic and economic interests. The Indian government is developing similar relations with Tamil capitalist parties in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Despite Sitharaman's call for uplifting the living standards of Sri Lankan estate workers, similar conditions face impoverished workers in Indian plantations.

An Oxfam 2021 working paper titled *In Defense of Living Wages for Tea Plantation Workers* explained: "The tea workers in Assam [in northeast India] receive wages less than the minimum threshold needed for a decent life... It is difficult for the workers and their families to meet their basic needs such as nutritious food, housing, clothing, quality healthcare, and education. They have to borrow from the local money lenders or work overtime which increases their physical burden, mental stress, and vulnerability of the entire family."

President Wickremesinghe's comments likewise reeked of hypocrisy. He claimed that his government was committed to "integration of the plantation community into Sri Lankan society," yet it was his United National Party that abolished

the citizenship rights of Tamil plantation workers in 1948.

The suppression of the democratic rights of estate workers was a major step in stirring up communal tensions and dividing Sinhalese and Tamil workers. Subsequent governments intensified anti-Tamil discrimination and violence that culminated in the 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Wickremesinghe declared that his government would ensure equal rights in employment, land and education for plantation workers. A committee has been formed to discuss key proposals.

Wickremesinghe's talk of "equal rights" is an utter fraud to cover up his government's real plans to further intensify the exploitation of plantation workers.

Explaining his plan to integrate estate employees, Wickremesinghe outlined the "out-grower" or revenue-share system "regional plantation companies will be asked to implement, which will eliminate the existing plantation system."

This plan is nothing but the proposal made by the major plantation companies over the past decade for increasing productivity while ending any benefits such as contributions to their pension funds. The CWC and other trade unions leaders have backed the proposal. However, workers have opposed it in estates where it has been implemented because of the massive burdens placed on them.

Wickremesinghe's statement shows the government will be centrally involved, with the help of the trade unions, in imposing this system. He has proposed to provide just 10 perches of land to each family to build a house.

Under this plan, workers are given a plot with 1,000-1,500 tea bushes. They are required to plant, trim, clear and pluck the bushes. The company supplies fertilizer and agro-chemicals but expenses are deducted from the harvest. Workers have no legal right to the land or to sell their harvest to outside buyers.

By transforming workers into "out-growers" with ten perches of land, the companies and the government are creating a system of bonded labour. The government is also planning to free the big companies of any responsibility for providing houses, maintaining decent wages and providing a pension system for workers.

The plantation industry is to be restructured along these lines as a part of the restructuring of state-owned enterprises under the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity agenda.

Plantation companies want to boost productivity to compete with other countries such as India, China, Kenya and Vietnam, and secure a larger share of the international tea market.

CWC leader Thondaman declared: "The reason we are

having this event today is to give due recognition to this community that has been neglected .... Collectively, I feel we are all nearing [this]."

This is a brazen lie. Under conditions in which the working class as a whole is under attack as a result of the IMF's austerity measures, the conditions of estate workers are getting worse, not better.

Workers are not "nearing a period of victory" but a period of more brutal exploitation, increasing poverty, unemployment and a rapidly rising cost of living. Under the revenue share system, workers will be subjected to further intensified exploitation for extraction of super profits for companies.

Other plantation unions, including the National Union of Workers, Democratic Workers Congress and Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union did not participate in the We200 event. All of the unions have a notorious record of close collaboration with successive governments and the plantation companies in attacking the democratic and social rights of estate workers.

The social crisis facing estate workers cannot be resolved under capitalism. Workers need to take the struggle for their rights into their own hands and form action committees in every estate independent of the trade unions and capitalist parties.

We propose a fight for the following demands:

- Line rooms must be abolished and all workers provided with decent houses with full facilities.
- A guaranteed monthly wage indexed to the cost of living and a decent pension.
- Guaranteed high quality health and education facilities.
- Plantation companies and banks must be nationalised under the democratic control of the working class.

Such a struggle requires an independent political movement of the working class to bring down the Wickremesinghe government and for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies as a part of the fight for international socialism.

For that it is necessary to fight for a Socialist and Democratic Congress of Workers and Rural Masses with democratically elected delegates from action committees of workers and rural poor throughout the country.



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