

Sri Lankan president promises meagre wage rises for estate workers amid growing unrest

Pani Wijesiriwardena

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On October 12, at a public rally in Bandarawela—one of Sri Lanka's key plantation districts—President Anura Kumara Dissanayake promised to raise the daily wage of estate workers to 1,750 rupees (\$US5.60) before the end of 2025. Workers currently earn 1,350 rupees.

Thousands of plantation employees were brought to the rally, where symbolic letters were handed out to 2,000 families from multiple districts, promising new homes on 10 perches (250 square metres) of land. The letters assured ownership deeds upon completion of the project.

These announcements were framed as part of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government's *Thriving Nation, Beautiful Life* manifesto. In fact, the housing project came from a 2017 Indian government grant initiated during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Sri Lanka. The launch was staged with Palani Digambaram, a discredited plantation trade union leader known for suppressing workers' rights.

Conscious of rising anger among plantation workers over wages and worsening conditions, Dissanayake told the audience: "The people of Malaiyaham [Sri Lanka's central hill country] must be given a fair wage to live a decent life." He claimed his government would meet the demand for a 1,750-rupee daily wage "in one way or another within this year."

The hollowness of this promise is obvious. Given the steep rise in the cost of living—especially since the 2020 COVID-19 crisis and the 2022 economic collapse—a 400-rupee increase fails to meet even minimal household needs.

The JVP's All Ceylon Estate Workers Union (ACEWU) had previously campaigned for a 2,000-rupee daily wage before the last election, only to abandon the demand, like other promises, following the election victory.

According to 2023 government data, a family of four with two children needs 92,000–100,000 rupees per month for basic survival. A worker earning 1,750 rupees for all 24 statutory workdays makes just 42,000 rupees monthly. Even if both spouses work, they earn only 84,000—still below the

poverty threshold.

On October 15, Dissanayake met plantation company CEOs about the wage hike. His media office said the companies cited "challenges" in implementing the increase—effectively rejecting the plan. None of the employers even attended an October 18 meeting with estate companies, trade unions, and the Labour Department.

Apart from rally organisers, the October 12 event generated little enthusiasm. Plantation workers have heard similar promises over decades by every government and trade union—from the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Up-country People's Front (UPF) to the National Workers Union (NUW) and Democratic Workers Congress (DWC).

The JVP's ACEWU has long functioned as an extension of these bureaucracies, which have repeatedly betrayed plantation workers' decades-long fight for a living wage.

India's housing project, offering 10,000 homes, barely scratches the surface of the housing crisis. Most estate families still live in colonial-era 10-by-12 foot (3-by-3.7 metre) barracks.

Post-independence, in 1948, the United National Party government stripped Tamil-speaking plantation workers of citizenship and voting rights, citing their Indian origin, as part of a broader strategy by the Sri Lankan political elite to divide the working class.

While these rights were eventually restored, after many families were forced to go to India, the community continues to be treated as second-class citizens. The Sinhala chauvinist JVP, which has a record of hostility to Tamil plantation workers, now references the 1948 injustice in a clear bid to hoodwink the population.

Each Indian-funded house is 550 square feet (51 square metres), with two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and toilet. Families are expected to contribute labour and materials to cut costs, putting more pressure on the highly exploited daily-wage earners.

According to one estimate, up to 261,000 families are living in estates, which means hundreds of thousands of houses are needed. The estate companies—backed by

successive governments—reap high profits by exploiting these workers and have totally ignored the housing problems.

Notwithstanding Dissanayake’s proclamation that plantation workers have “laboured hand in hand with the soil” for over 200 years, their conditions are dire and worsening. He pledged to improve their “economic” and “social” circumstances and declared that education, health, income, and mental peace are “fundamental rights.”

However, after promising to renegotiate the IMF austerity program during his election campaign, Dissanayake has only deepened those policies since taking office. Plantation workers are among the worst affected.

Newly-introduced “education reforms” by Prime Minister Dr. Harini Amarasuriya mandates the closure of schools with fewer than 50 students—described as “rationalising” the system. Many plantation schools fall into this category, meaning closures and rising dropout rates. The “reform” is a thinly veiled budget cut.

The Bandarawela event was the most significant presidential appearance in plantation regions since the May 2025 local government elections. During the 2024 presidential and parliamentary elections, the JVP/NPP capitalised on discontent with the traditional plantation unions-cum-parties—the CWC, NUW, UPF, and DWC. The result was a dramatic collapse in support for the traditional capitalist parties. The JVP/NPP’s overall vote share surged from 42.3 percent in the presidential election to 61.6 percent in the parliamentary polls, securing a two-thirds majority and Dissanayake’s presidency.

But less than nine months later, opposition to the Dissanayake administration is rising and reflected in an 18.3 percent drop for the JVP/NPP in the local elections compared to its parliamentary vote.

In key plantation districts—Nuwara Eliya and Badulla—its vote declined by 13 percent and 16 percent, respectively. Where it lost majorities, the JVP/NPP sought the support of the CWC to form local councils—while also helping the CWC do the same elsewhere.

Confronting criticism for delaying the Provincial Council elections, the JVP/NPP government now claims it will hold them early next year while trying to sustain its dwindling vote base in plantation areas by posturing as defenders of worker rights. As elsewhere, the government’s major political prop is the trade union bureaucracy, and its suppression of workers’ struggles.

Dissanayake’s speech was especially hypocritical when he spoke about the identity of plantation people. “Your ancestors came to Sri Lanka 202 years ago. ... How can you be outsiders? We must recognise you as a community with a unique identity in this country,” he said.

Anyone familiar with the JVP’s political history will recognise the fraudulence of this statement.

In the late 1960s, as part of JVP’s early cadre training, one of its notorious “five classes” labelled India—a semi-colonial country—as an imperialist threat and branded plantation workers as a “fifth column instrument of Indian expansionism.”

Today, Dissanayake promotes the very identity politics pushed by plantation unions acting as political parties and the Tamil nationalist parties in the North and East. He repeatedly referred to workers as “Malaiyaham people,” and called for them to be recognised as a “community with a unique identity.”

This identity politics—promoted by the JVP/NPP politicians and the union bureaucrats—serves to divide the working class along ethnic and religious lines. Union leaders with business interests and along with emerging middle-class elements in estate areas are lobbying for a separate administrative district to serve their own class agendas.

All ruling parties, including the JVP/NPP, are haunted by the April–July 2022 mass uprising, when workers across ethnic lines united in struggle against the ruling class amid a huge social and economic crisis. That movement revealed the potential for class unity against the entire capitalist system.

Plantation workers must reject this divisive identity politics. As Colvin R. de Silva of the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI)—then a Trotskyist leader—declared in Parliament in 1948 while opposing the reactionary citizenship laws:

“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.”

Tamil-speaking plantation workers can secure a living wage, decent housing, education and healthcare only through a united struggle of the working class—across ethnic and national lines—against the IMF’s austerity program and the capitalist JVP/NPP government implementing it, based on an international socialist program.



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