

Estate workers in Sri Lanka's central district protest, demand decent housing after cyclone

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Cyclone Ditwah has laid bare the decades-long social crime perpetrated against Sri Lanka's plantation workers by successive governments, plantation companies and the trade union bureaucracy. Anger is mounting among workers, as many have yet to receive the aid promised by the JVP/NPP government headed President Anura Kumara Dissanayake.

Nearly 50 plantation workers were killed in landslides and floods triggered by the cyclone, with hundreds of houses completely destroyed and thousands more partially damaged across the plantation districts of Kandy, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Matale, Kegalle and Kurunegala—regions home to some of the most impoverished sections of the working class.

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the Stockholm and Elgin estates to speak with displaced workers.

At the Stockholm Estate, managed by Horana Plantation Company in Nuwara Eliya District, 65 families—about 200 people, including many children—have been displaced. They are now sheltering in the estate's local school, Barathi Tamil Vidyalaya, after their line rooms suffered severe damage, with cracks spreading through walls and floors.

On December 17, around 700 workers and their family members held a protest inside the estate, including a picket in front of the tea factory. They demanded land to build decent homes in safe locations.

Despite the obvious danger, estate management and government officials have dismissed workers' concerns. According to workers, the estate manager, a land research officer, the village officer and a welfare officer visited the damaged homes days after the cyclone and conducted only a cursory inspection. They claimed the damage was "minor" and advised families to repair the structures themselves and move back in.

Workers have rejected these claims and continue to

shelter at the school. They warn that any further cyclone or heavy rainfall could lead to catastrophic collapses.

The line rooms are decades-old, barrack-style dwellings. Each room, about 100 square feet, houses entire families. Some have been modestly improved by workers using their own meager earnings. Reporters observed extensive cracking in the walls at Stockholm. In past incidents, line rooms have collapsed during heavy rainfall and landslides.

During the protest, a young girl told the media: "We will not stop this struggle until we abolish our slave line-room system. We are demanding a decent housing system for us."

Subhashini, a 33-year-old estate worker, described the authorities' callous response to the WSWs: "During the cyclone, the walls and floors of our house were broken in several places. But officials say these are 'minor' damages. The estate management refuses to provide land or housing in a safer area."

"Previously, seven hectares of estate land had been allocated for a worker housing scheme," she explained. "But now the company has started cultivating coffee and other crops there."

Her father, Karuppiah, a 65-year-old retired worker, exposed the role of state officials as instruments of estate management. "They first went to the estate manager's office before coming to our homes later in the evening," he said. "The land research officer is supposed to test the soil to determine if it's safe to live here, but nothing was done. How can they tell us to just repair and stay in the same place? Neither the government nor estate management cares about our lives."

Another retired worker, 77-year-old V. Vempan, said: "I started working here at 18. My wife is 65. Both of us are sick. Our three daughters are married and live elsewhere. We had just returned from the hospital, but got no help from either the government or the estate. We

don't have a pension. The estate manager and the officials spent only five minutes looking at our house. No one is helping us."

The role of the plantation trade unions has further inflamed workers' anger. On December 22, leaders from the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the National Union of Workers (NUW), the Up-Country People's Front and the ruling National People's Power (NPP) union met with the estate manager to request land for temporary housing for displaced workers.

The manager bluntly refused, saying that "even an inch of land" could not be allocated without company and government approval. The union leaders begged management but refused to mobilize workers to fight for decent housing.

WSWS reporters also revisited Elgin Estate, 17 km from Talawakele, where workers continue to shelter in a local church.

While some affected families have returned to their damaged line rooms, 26 families have refused to do so, defying the village officer's directive. One worker explained: "All the walls of our house were damaged during the cyclone. It's too dangerous to live there—a landslide could affect us at any time."

Even the National Building Research Organization, a state agency, acknowledged the danger but merely recommended that residents return while "vigilantly" looking after themselves.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party spoke with workers about the need to form independent action committees to unite with other workers and fight for decent, safe housing. Around 15 workers participated in the discussion.

The demand for safe and livable housing has been a long-standing issue for hundreds of thousands of plantation workers. Yet the government and plantation companies remain openly hostile to this basic right. The devastation wrought by Cyclone Ditwah—impacting plantations in all 25 districts—has pushed this demand once again to the forefront.

Official figures report 639 people dead and 213 missing, with thousands injured, some critically. Around 6,000 houses were completely destroyed and 100,000 partially damaged. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government has promised support for rebuilding, but many workers do not believe them. The regime has broken all its election promises and is enforcing austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

Across the plantation districts, the trade unions have played a key role in blocking any independent mobilization of workers against both the government and the companies. Their appeals for land and housing are hollow and tied to implementing the "revenue share scheme"—which has been proposed by big plantation companies as a new method to intensify exploitation.

Under this scheme, workers are assigned 1,000 or more tea bushes to maintain, with inputs provided by the company. After harvesting, the company deducts its costs and profit from the sale, leaving workers with whatever remains. It is a modern-day rentier system. Workers oppose it, though it is already being piloted with the help of the union bureaucracy.

Repeated appeals for permanent housing on safe land have been ignored by the Anura Kumara Dissanayake government, estate managers and local officials, all of whom treat the disaster not as a human catastrophe but as a logistic inconvenience.

This catastrophe has once again shown the urgent need for workers to break with the trade union apparatus and form independent action committees in every estate and workplace. Through democratic discussion, these committees must organize strikes, pickets and demonstrations to unite plantation workers with the broader working class against the government and the plantation companies.

The fight for decent housing must be linked to the broader struggle for a pensionable monthly wage, guaranteed leave and medical benefits for estate workers.

This is part of the wider fight for the nationalization of the plantations and other major companies under workers' control, and for a workers' and farmers' government. Only through the independent mobilization of the working class, armed with a socialist and internationalist perspective, can the conditions that led to this disaster be overcome. The Socialist Equality Party calls on plantation workers to take up this path and pledges to assist in building action committees and uniting workers in a common struggle against austerity, repression and capitalist exploitation.



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