

Sri Lanka: Thousands of farmers protest over rising costs and low paddy prices

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Over the past week, thousands of Sri Lankan farmers have held protests over a series of demands, including a guaranteed price for paddy. The protests reflect mounting anger among towards the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government, which has sought to offload the burden of the economic crisis, exacerbated by the Iran war, onto the masses. Farmers were already reeling from the brutal austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

Farmers are demanding a guaranteed minimum price of 140 rupees (\$US 0.44) per kilogram of paddy, reductions in the prices of fertiliser and agrochemicals, and a subsidised fuel quota.

On June 16, nearly 2,000 farmers protested in Hingurakgoda in the Polonnaruwa District, North Central Province. On the same day, around 500 farmers demonstrated in front of the Kantale state administration office in the Trincomalee District. On June 17, more than 2,000 farmers from Mahaweli C Zone in the Ampara District protested in Dehiattakandiya town.

About 200 farmers in the Hungama Deniyaya Etawetuna area in the Hambantota District gathered near Deniyaya Bodhiya, breaking coconuts and cursing the government.

In the northern district of Kilinochchi, hundreds of farmers staged a protest on June 17, demanding a fair purchase price for their paddy harvest. A delegation of farmers submitted a petition to local government officials outlining their grievances, including rising production costs and the low prices.

The protesters shouted: "Now farmers understand—they're all the same!" meaning that every government is the same. They warned that if their demands were not met urgently, they would march on Colombo in a mass protest.

The demonstrations were organised by local farmer organisations registered under the Agrarian Development Act, which links farmer activities with the Agrarian Department. The actions were largely organised independently of the major farmers' unions and federations, which are affiliated with political parties and some of which directly or indirectly support the JVP/NPP government. The leader of the JVP-led All Ceylon Farmers Federation, Namal Karunaratne, is also the deputy minister of agriculture.

Speaking to the media on June 17, Agriculture Minister K.D. Lakantha attempted to downplay the protests, claiming they

were limited to a few locations in the Polonnaruwa District. He also threatened that, regardless of the protests, the government would not purchase paddy until the Yala harvest (one of the two paddy cultivation seasons in the country, running from April/May to August/September).

"[Even if] one protest or a hundred protests are held in Colombo or elsewhere—the Paddy Marketing Board will buy paddy only during the Yala harvesting period," the minister said.

Responding to farmers' accusations that the government had failed to fulfil its election promise of a guaranteed price of 150 rupees per kilogram, Lakantha claimed that production costs had been higher at that time, ridiculously suggesting that production costs are now low.

Costs remain extremely high due to increases in the prices of fertiliser, agrochemicals, seed paddy, equipment, and ploughing and harvesting expenses. Farmers estimate the cost of producing one kilogram of paddy at around 120 rupees, while private traders and rice mill owners purchase it for only 90 rupees per kilogram.

Although President Anura Kumara Dissanayake told parliament on April 7 that a 50 kilogram bag of fertiliser would be provided at a subsidised price of 10,500 rupees, farmers say sufficient quantities are not available at that price. As a result, they are forced to buy from private dealers at exorbitant prices ranging from 17,000 to 18,500 rupees per bag. Farmers told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that, together with other expenses, the cost of cultivating one acre of paddy has now risen to about 130,000 rupees.

WSWS reporters spoke with farmers in the Ginnoruwa section of Mahiyanganaya in the Mahaweli C Zone, where about 300 farming families live.

R.D. Jayasundara said: "This time it cost 80,000 rupees to cultivate a bushel of paddy, in contrast to last time when it cost about 50,000 rupees. Prices have doubled. This situation is difficult to bear. All the oil and agrochemicals are costly, and they are not of the same standard but are of low quality. The seeds die when we use such substandard chemicals.

"Then desperate farmers look for different agrochemicals wherever they are available. All this is done to destroy the farmer. Now a bag of TSP [Triple Super Phosphate] costs

14,000 rupees, and a bag of MOP [Muriate of Potash] costs 13,000 rupees. These expenses have never occurred before.

“We all voted together to bring this government to power. It is no longer possible to live as we did then. Since the price of paddy was low, we pawned gold at the bank and borrowed money, but the price is still only 90 rupees per kilo, and we use that money to cover our expenses. This is not sustainable. Anyway, although we know that the Iran war directly affected the price of oil, there is nothing we can do about it.”

Criticising political parties, including the ruling JVP/NPP, Jayasundara said, “All of them are liars. Not a single government is looking into these issues. The opposition is not talking about the problems we are facing now. They are only talking about somehow coming to power.”

R.D. Jayasena, 59, who is in the business of supplying registered seed paddy, complained about how large agribusiness conglomerates such as CIC Holdings and Browns Group, along with wealthy local rice mill owners, have mercilessly taken over. “Like these companies, the government is working to develop the rich. It is not protecting poor people like us. We were deceived. Look inside the house—there are about 200 bushels of seed paddy worth about 1 million rupees. How much loss has there been? Now, if these are sold at the normal price, we cannot get even a fraction of the seed paddy price,” he said.

H.M. Saman Hemantha Kumara, a 56-year-old farmer, said: “Look at the prices of oil and fertiliser. Paddy should be more than 150 rupees per kilo for us to be even slightly sustainable.”

Kumara showed a receipt to WSWs reporters to prove that he had mortgaged some gold and borrowed 100,000 rupees for paddy farming. Sacks of harvested paddy were stored inside his house in the hope that the price would increase. The frustrated farmer said: “The price of paddy didn’t increase. Now we are paying interest. We are in a mess. No one can get out of it.”

Like other farmers, Kumara denounced all political parties for repeatedly cheating them to win elections and abandoning them after coming to power. “We had high hopes for this JVP/NPP government. They are all the same,” he said.

Not only paddy farmers but also those cultivating vegetables, potatoes, onions, fruits, maize, and other cash crops face similar problems.

Under the dictates of the World Bank and the IMF, successive capitalist governments—particularly the right-wing administration of J. R. Jayewardene—implemented open-market policies from 1977, unleashing a sustained assault on the working class and rural poor. Subsidies for poor farmers were systematically slashed, while agriculture, agricultural inputs, and crop markets were opened up to private capital. Today, agribusiness giants, along with rice mill owners, dominate the sector.

In recent years, farmers have engaged in struggles demanding fair prices for their produce and reductions in the cost of

fertiliser, agrochemicals, and equipment.

Tens of thousands of farmers participated in the mass uprising of 2022 against the government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, which forced him to flee the country and resign. However, due to the betrayal of the uprising by the trade unions, pseudo-left organisations such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), and the JVP, the ruling class was able to install Ranil Wickremesinghe—an agent of imperialism and the IMF—as president through undemocratic means. Wickremesinghe ruthlessly implemented IMF austerity measures, placing the burden of the crisis on workers and the rural poor.

The JVP/NPP government came to power by exploiting widespread hostility among workers and farmers toward the traditional capitalist parties, making false promises to resolve their problems. JVP/NPP-aligned unions echoed these campaign promises. Dissanayake has not only abandoned these promises but has intensified the austerity measures of previous governments.

Today, some peasant organisations seeking to lead the farmers’ protests are fostering similar illusions by claiming that pressure on the government or appeals to President Dissanayake can secure solutions. Their calls to replace ministers such as K. D. Lalkantha or Deputy Minister Namal Karunaratne offer no way forward.

The fundamental problems facing farmers can be addressed only through the independent mobilisation of rural farmers against the domination of agribusiness corporations, intermediaries, and the banking system. This struggle must include the demand for the nationalisation of major plantations, agribusiness companies, and banks under workers’ control. This means farmers and the rural poor must mobilise, under the leadership of the working class, to fight for the socialist reorganisation of society.



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