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By W. A. Sunil
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Plantation unions move to shut down wage struggle amid Sri Lankan political crisis

Sri Lankan plantation unions have aligned themselves with different political factions in the bitter conflict raging inside the country's ruling elite and are now attempting to suppress the plantation workers' fight for a 100 percent increase in their daily wage.

On October 26, President Maithripala Sirisena sacked Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and replaced him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse. Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader Arumugam Thondaman, who is also a member of parliament, immediately backed Rajapakse and was appointed minister of hill country new villages and infrastructure.

Vadivel Suresh, former secretary of Wickremesinghe's United National Party-controlled Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU), defected from the party and joined Rajapakse. He was also rewarded with a key position and made the state minister for plantation industries.

In an attempt to deflect the anger of workers over their sordid political moves, Thondaman and Vadivel both claimed that Rajapakse promised to increase estate workers' daily wages, from 500 rupees (\$US2.94) to 1,000 rupees.

Other Sri Lankan plantation unions—the National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic Peoples' Front (DPF) and the Up-country People's Front (UPF), led by P. Digambaram, Mano Ganeshan and P. Radhakrishnan respectively—are currently supporting dismissed Prime Minister Wickremesinghe.

The three union officials, who were former ministers in Wickremesinghe's government, are supporting his attempts to regain the office, hoping to restore their own lost privileges. Despite these manoeuvres, plantation workers, who began protests in early September to demand higher pay, are continuing their struggle.



Plantation workers protesting in Talawakele last September

Last week hundreds of plantation workers from the Norwood, Irvay, Nallathanni Hapugasthenna estates in the central hill district demonstrated to demand a wage rise. The workers denounced Thondaman and Vadivel during the demonstrations, declaring that the union officials had been given ministerial positions in order to betray the wage struggle. About 100 workers also demonstrated in Mathugama, a Kalutara district town, south of Colombo.

The long-running plantation workers' struggle has won powerful support from young people and other sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

On October 26, for example, nearly 1,000 school teachers from the Deraniyagala and Dehiowita estates in the Kegalle district, and hundreds of trainee teachers from Kotagala in the Nuwara Eliya district, rallied in support of the plantation workers.

Teachers from the Kopay training college and Kaithady medical college students in the Jaffna district also demonstrated on the same day for the estate workers. One Kopay training college teacher told the media: "Our students' parents are plantation workers. To continue their studies the plantation workers must be paid at least 1,000 rupees [per day], so we support their struggle."

On October 24, just two days before Sirisena's political coup, over 5,000 young Sinhala, Muslim and Tamil workers from Colombo and suburbs protested in Galle Face Green in Central Colombo in solidarity with the plantation workers. For the first time, the protest, much to the shock of Sri Lanka's ruling elite, was organised using social media.

In fact, the major factor triggering the crisis of the Sirisena and Wickremesinghe administration is the mass popular opposition to the government's implementation of the International Monetary Fund's austerity program which is slashing social rights and living conditions. The plantation workers' wage struggle is a crucial element in this growing mass movement and one that the unions are desperately attempting to shut down.

While Thondaman and Vadivel's claim they accepted ministerial positions because they were promised that the plantation workers would be given a pay increase, Rajapakse is reported to have told them they should discuss the issue with treasury officials.

But in discussions with treasury officials on November 5, the Planters Association again flatly rejected workers' demands for a 100 percent wage increase. Plantation Association officials again said that estate companies would only give a 20 percent increase, or just 100 rupees, and declared that workers could earn almost 400 rupees through additional allowances tied to a productivity increase.

The Plantation Association also rejected giving a 10,000-rupee bonus for the annual Deepavali religious festival and insisted that 1,000 rupees in wages per day was "completely unrealistic" because the majority of plantation companies were running at a loss.

The Tea Factory Owners Association also claimed said that a 1,000-rupee daily wage would be "catastrophic" for the industry and any wage increase "must be tied to productivity and attendance."

Plantation workers are among the poorest sections of the Sri Lankan working class. Brought from South India by British plantation owners 150 years ago, during colonial rule, the majority of plantation workers and their families still live in small line-rooms, without basic facilities, and grossly inadequate health and education facilities. Their current daily wage is insufficient to pay for basic food necessities.

A recent report by the Institute of Social Development in Kandy noted that the average living wage for plantation workers should be 44,711 rupees per month for a family of 4.5 individuals.

Before last month's political coup, the former plantation minister, Naveen Dissanayake, sided with the companies, declaring that workers' demands were unacceptable and if granted would "collapse" the industry. This is also the position of the Rajapakse camp.

The plantation union leaders, who are also bourgeois politicians, do not defend the estate workers but function as an industrial police force for the companies and the government.

The alignment of estate unions with the competing political factions of the ruling elite is not limited to the current political crisis in Sri Lanka or the plantation industry. Other unions have taken side, directly or indirectly, with Wickremesinghe's United National Party or Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

Whichever faction or political alignment of the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie ultimately wins control, the new government will brutally implement the profit demands of big business and international investors. With the help of trade unions and pseudo-left organisations, it will move to suppress all working-class resistance.

That is why workers in the large estates, and in work places and neighbourhoods throughout the country, must take the initiative to form action committees, independent of trade unions and all factions of bourgeoisie, and fight for socialist policies and for a workers' and peasants' government.