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Sri Lankan plantation workers launch indefinite strike for 100 percent pay rise

Hundreds of thousands of plantation workers began an indefinite strike on Wednesday, demanding a doubling of their daily wage. Workers from all of Sri Lanka's tea plantation districts, including Nuwara-Eliya, Badulla, Kandy, Kegalla, Ratnapura and Kalutara and Colombo, are participating.

On November 26, the workers walked out, insisting on their longstanding demand for a 100 percent rise. Plantation workers, among the most oppressed sections of the island's working class, currently work for a mere 500 rupees (\$US2.80) per day.

In an attempt to derail the struggle, the plantation trade unions, including the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) led by Arumugam Thondaman, held another round of futile discussions with the company managements on Tuesday but the employers flatly rejected doubling the basic wage.

Even after reluctantly calling for an indefinite strike, the CWC leaders did not want workers to engage in protests. Nevertheless, pickets, meetings and demonstrations have erupted in several estates.



Workers picketing a factory at the Abbotsleigh estate

Members of rival unions, including the National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic People's Front (DPF) and Up-country People's Front (UPF), joined the strike, defying their leaders' calls not to support it.

In demonstrations organised independently of the unions, workers chanted slogans against the Regional Plantation Companies (RPC) and the government.

This struggle by workers will compound the political crisis of the ruling elite, which is wracked by bitter factional rivalry and facing mounting social opposition.

When President Maithripala Sirisena unconstitutionally sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister and replaced him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse on October 26, CWC leader Thondaman joined Rajapakse's administration. Thondaman justified his action by citing Rajapakse's utterly bogus promise to increase the daily wage to 1,000 rupees.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members visited the hill plantations, where workers expressed their anger toward the unions and their leaders.

In one of the four divisions of the Abbotsleigh estate, five kilometres from Hatton, around 70 workers picketing near the factory listened enthusiastically as SEP speakers explained the need for an international strategy and new forms of organisation for the workers to win their demands.

SEP members emphasised that the plantation companies were not prepared to increase wages but were instead insisting on higher productivity to overcome the industry's crisis and extract profits via the ruthless exploitation of workers.



M. Thevarajah addressing the workers

SEP speaker M. Thevarajah said: “Struggles by workers have erupted in every country against the attacks imposed by the capitalist classes. Sri Lankan workers have to unite with their international class brothers to fight for a socialist program.”

Thevarajah urged workers to establish democratically-elected action committees in their workplaces and estates. The committees had to be completely independent of the unions, which had become agents of the companies.

“Workers must take control of large estates, big industries and companies and banks and organise production and distribution for the interests of working people and the poor, and not for profits of the rich,” the speaker said.

“Only then can workers defend their social and democratic rights. The plantation companies’ rejection of workers’ demands, with the support of the government, shows that workers can win their rights only in a political struggle, unifying with workers in every sector and internationally.”

The picketing workers shouted slogans: “Workers of all countries unite!” “Build action committees on international socialist policies” and “Fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government.” After discussion with SEP members the Abbotsleigh workers decided to form an action committee.



Kanakasapai

Kanakasapai, 57, who has worked in the estate for 42 years, told the WSWS correspondents: “Union officials deliberately bar the outside world from us, preventing collaboration with other workers and blocking knowledge of the root cause of our problems. All workers should know the issues plantation workers are facing. If workers unite, then they can win their rights.”

Sivapakyam, 60, who has worked in the plantation for 30 years, commented: “We are not asking for a luxurious life. We are just asking for a 1,000-rupee daily wage to feed our families, and educate our children. The doctors are advising us that we need to give vitamins to our children as they are not healthy. How can we find vitamins when it is hard to even earn enough for a daily meal? We are ready to go to other divisions too and organise the workers.”



Sivapakyam

Workers at the Hanthana Estate near Kandy also criticised the unions.

Nawaratne said: “The real problem we face is, we don’t have a leadership. We don’t have faith in any union. The unions no longer worry about plantation workers. I think the workers need to form new organisations to fight for their rights. We welcome such a movement.”

Kumaraswami, a recently retired worker from the same estate, explained: “The company owners are closing many estates and now turning them into hotels and other businesses. Multi-millionaire businessmen take hold of acres of land while the plantation workers are pleading for a few perches [25 square metres] to build a house to live.

“The only organisations we knew to present our demands were trade unions. But now I don’t believe that. Workers will surely support a movement that will provide a proper program.”



Kumaraswami

This pay struggle has come to a critical stage. The companies have insisted that workers must agree to the employers' revenue-share system. Under that system, workers are allocated about 1,000 tea bushes to work, transforming them into share-croppers. Whole families have to toil in allocated plots.

In estates where the scheme was implemented, workers have begun to hand the plots back to the companies because the system has become a massive burden on workers' families. In other estates, the companies have failed to implement the scheme because of the resistance of the workers.

As Thondeman's membership of Rajapakse's government typifies, the unions are acting as agents of the companies and governments.

Leaders of the NUW, DPF and UPF—P. Digambaram, Mano Ganeshan and P. Radhakrishnan—were ministers in the previous government of Sirisena and Wickremesinghe. As governments come and go, the union bureaucracies shift their allegiances to gain privileges and suppress workers' struggles.

The unions have lined up on one side or another of the fight between rival factions of the capitalist class, one led by Sirisena and Rajapakse, and the other by Wickremesinghe. Thondaman supports Sirisena and Rajapakse, and the other unions back Wickremesinghe.

Faced with an upsurge of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally, these factions are preparing to crush this resistance. As the SEP speakers stressed, the only alternative is the fight for a workers' and peasants' government on the basis of international socialism. This means joining and building the SEP as a mass revolutionary party.