

Sri Lankan plantation union pressures workers to end strike

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The pro-government National Workers Union (NUW) sabotaged a determined strike of 600 plantation workers from the Glenuige Estate at Maskeliya in central Sri Lanka who were fighting against increasing their workloads. The workers are due to return to work today.

Workers from the Deeside plantation of the Glenuige Estate started their strike on Tuesday for two demands: to reduce the daily target for plucked tea from the current 18 kilograms to the previous level of 16 kilograms from which it was increased last April; and to be paid for the extra two kilograms plucked since April.

The management had asked workers to increase the target for only two months, saying the Maskeliya Plantation Company that owns the estate was making losses. No payment was made for the increased production. Moreover, the company is now seeking to make the increased target permanent.

Workers started the strike over the heads of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Upcountry People's Front (UPF) and NUW as these unions invariably side with management. A worker told the WSWS: "Management and the unions are working hand in glove. That is why we took a decision to launch the strike independently."

NUW area leader Naguleswaran yesterday told workers that management had agreed to reduce the target to the previous level. He also claimed that wage arrears for the increased plucking of tea could be obtained by filing a case in the Labour Tribunal. However, there is no written pledge to lower the target. Moreover, Labour Tribunal takes a long time to hear cases and often sides with management.

When questioned by workers, Naguleswaran assured them that the company's word could be trusted.

However, as one worker told the WSWS, "This is another betrayal by the unions. Workers will go back as there is no alternative at the moment."

Like all plantation unions, the NUW also functions as a political party. Its leader R. Digambaram is a cabinet minister in the newly formed government headed by President Maithripala Sirisena. A continuation of the strike had the potential to spread to other estates where workers face the same problem of increasing workload; so the NUW immediately intervened to end the stoppage.

The NUW is utterly corrupt, sides with the plantation companies and is preoccupied with wretched political manoeuvres to enhance its privileges. Digambaram won his seat in the 2010 election by campaigning with the United National Party (UNP) but switched to join the government of former president Mahinda Rajapakse.

Just three months before the January 8 presidential election, Rajapakse appointed Digambaram as a minister to keep the NUW in the ruling coalition. However, two weeks after Sirisena defected from the Rajapakse government to become the opposition candidate in the presidential election, Digambaram performed another political somersault and joined the Sirisena bandwagon.

The other plantation unions are just as venal. The UPF leader V. Radhakrishnan is also a cabinet minister. CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman was a cabinet minister in the previous Rajapakse government but recently expressed support for the new government with an eye to obtaining a new ministerial post.

Plantation workers, on the other hand, continue to receive poverty-level daily wages of 620 rupees (less than \$US5), including all allowances. Their monthly income depends on the number of days they receive

work, which is around 25 days or less. With sharp increases in the cost of living, the wage is not sufficient to even meet basic needs.

Over the past three years, the unions have collaborated with the companies in reaching secret deals to impose increased productivity on workers. In 2012, thousands of workers at the Welioya and Bogwantalawa estates took strike action against the speed up, but were betrayed by the unions which allowed the companies to impose their targets.

The undermining of wages and conditions is driven by the cut-throat international competition for markets faced by Sri Lanka from other tea producers, Kenya, China, Vietnam and India. President of the Planters Association, Roshan Rajadurai, recently pointed out that 70 percent of the cost of production consisted of labour expenses and insisted that costs must be cut.

Rajadurai told the *Daily.ft* last October: “What we request for is an extremely reasonable incremental increase of at least 2 kg in the daily plucking average per worker, which is highly feasible but would nevertheless go a long way in assisting the companies to break even.” Such a target would lower unit production costs by 7 percent, but means backbreaking work for workers.

The number of workers employed in tea plantation companies has been slashed from 345,000 to 208,000 over the two decades since the privatization of the state corporations that owned and ran the tea estates. Many workers have been forced to find other jobs as plantation wages are so low. The population of workers and their families who live on the plantations is still over a million. Many are unemployed or underemployed.

The plantation companies are only able to impose speed-up and the cutting of conditions with the assistance of the unions and the government. Workers in other private sector industries including the free trade zones face the same problems.

The Sirisena government recently announced in its interim budget an increase to the monthly wage of public sector employees of 10,000 rupees paid in two instalments. The rise is a cynical gesture, as the government prepares for parliamentary elections, to capitalise on the anger over Rajapakse’s public sector wage freeze since 2006.

The government, however, proposed no such increase

for private sector workers. Finance Minister Ravi Karunanayake declared if the private sector was compelled to increase salaries “they will have to close companies.” He made a half-hearted appeal to companies to increase monthly salaries by 2,500 rupees, sometime in the future.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members intervened in the Glenuige strike to discuss the political crisis confronting the working class. Only by taking action independent of the unions on the basis of a socialist perspective can workers defend their rights.

The striking workers agree with the proposal to form an independent workers’ action committee and to turn to other workers in the plantations and other industries who face the same problems. The discussion included the need for a monthly wage, to oppose arbitrary increases in work, a guaranteed leave system, as well as proper medical facilities, education and housing in the estates.

Decent living standard and working conditions can be established through a political fight for a workers’ and peasants government to implement socialist policies that rationally plan production to meet the pressing social needs of working people not the profits of the rich.

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