

Indian trade unions shut down Kerala plantation workers' strike

By Arun Kumar
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A joint council of Indian plantation trade unions (JCTU) shut down a 17-day strike by over 300,000 tea, coffee, rubber and cardamom estate workers in the southern Indian state of Kerala after reaching a sell-out wage deal with the state government and employers on October 14.

While the plantation unions originally demanded that tea estate workers' daily wage be more than doubled—from 232 rupees to 500 rupees (\$US7.55)—and annual bonuses be increased from 10 percent of wages to 20 percent, they ended the strike after negotiating a paltry 69-rupee daily wage rise.

The wage deal was worked out in six rounds of closed-door talks in the Plantation Labour Committee (PLC), a tripartite body of union bureaucrats, state government officials and plantation management representatives.

An October 16 editorial in the *Hindu* newspaper hailed the settlement, claiming that estate workers' daily wage increased by “a fair measure” and that the strike shutdown would “come as a welcome relief to the ailing [plantation] sector.”

Those involved in the JCTU include the All India Trade Union Congress and Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU)—affiliated to the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM respectively — the Indian National Trade Union Congress, aligned to the Congress Party, and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sabha, which is controlled by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

From the outset, the Congress Party-led United Democratic Front (UDF) government in Kerala backed the plantation companies. Kerala Chief Minister Oman Chandy repeated plantation owners' claims, declaring that if estate management granted a 100 percent daily wage rise the state's plantation sector would be forced

to close.

Following the strike shutdown Chandy praised the wage deal, claiming it was a “good decision” because it was acceptable to workers and affordable for plantation owners. Chandy hailed the unions for their cooperation with the state government.

The UDF administration, which faces local elections in early November and a state election in May 2016, said the PLC will hold meetings with plantation owners to address their concerns.

CITU district leader P. Gagarin cynically claimed that the majority of estate workers were satisfied with the new agreement and that the unions were negotiating other demands, including increased bonuses, with estate managements. He claimed that plantation owners have offered a 16.5 percent bonus and he was expecting a favourable decision at a PLC meeting in November.

The unions were anxious to halt the strike, fearing that the 300,000-strong estate walkout would win broader popular support and escalate out of the control of the unions and into a political conflict with the state and federal governments.

Last month, about 6,000 plantation workers employed by Kannan Devan Hills Plantations Limited in Munnar held a nine-day wildcat strike, demanding that their daily wage be increased to 500 rupees and annual bonuses lifted to 20 percent of wages. The striking workers were openly hostile to all the trade union federations. They protested outside union offices and banned union bureaucrats from having anything to do with their claims.

The plantation unions are variously affiliated with India's establishment parties, which have ruthlessly imposed the free-market economic programs and social austerity measures demanded by Indian big business

and international finance capital. The CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), of which the CPI is a partner, is currently the official opposition in Kerala and implemented the same economic policies while in office.

United Planters Association of Southern India Chairman N. Dharmaraj told the media that the wage deal was “unnatural and unworkable,” claiming that labour comprised 60 percent of plantation industry production costs. Chief Minister Chandy promised to establish a one-man commission into the plantation industry. According to the *Hindu*, the state government has offered the companies lower plantation and agricultural incomes taxes.

While the Kerala state government and the unions are congratulating themselves on shutting down the strike, estate workers and their families live in dire poverty, with increasing demands by employers for greater productivity.

The average official daily wage is around 230 rupees. This consists of a basic payment of 83 rupees for 20 kilos, with additional payments tied to productivity “incentives.” Tea pluckers, in fact, have to harvest between 60–70 kilos per day in order to receive the 230 rupees, which involves working up to 12 hours per day.

The profit-hungry corporations that control the plantation industry face declining export markets and falling tea prices as the industry is hit by the recessionary tendencies affecting the world market. As in the other tea-producing countries, the plantation companies insist that workers should bear the burden of this crisis. In Sri Lanka, planters have categorically opposed any wage rise for estate workers.

The union betrayal of the Kerala plantation workers’ struggle for higher wages and better living standards demonstrates the necessity for estate workers to break from the trade unions, which are the industrial police force of the corporate elite and the state apparatus. They need to build their own action committees to mobilise estate workers throughout India, Sri Lanka and the sub-continent.

This involves a direct political fight against the Kerala state administration and the BJP-led government in New Delhi, which is imposing the demands of big business, including privatisation and even greater attacks on wages and working conditions.

In other words, this is a struggle against the capitalist

profit system itself, as part of the fight for workers’ and peasants’ governments and socialist policies, including the nationalisation of the plantations under the democratic control of the working class. That requires the construction of a revolutionary leadership in the working class through building the Socialist Equality Party in India as a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International

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