

Sri Lankan plantation unions embrace Indian prime minister

By R. Shreeharan
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Sri Lanka's key plantation unions—the Tamil Progressive Alliance and the Ceylon Workers Congress—enthusiastically welcomed Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as an ally of estate workers during his recent trip to the island.

Modi visited Sri Lanka on May 11 and 12 at the invitation of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe to inaugurate the International Wesak Ceremony, the country's main Buddhist festival. Following events in Colombo, he travelled to the central plantation district, at the invitation of the unions, where he opened a hospital in Dickoya built with Indian government funds and addressed a meeting of plantation workers at Norwood near Hatton.

The meeting was arranged by the Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), which consists of the National Union of Workers (NUW), the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) and the Up-country People's Front (UPF). Leaders of these unions—P. Digambaram, Mano Ganesan and V. Radhakrishnan respectively—currently hold ministerial positions in the Sri Lankan government. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), which backs the government, was also involved in organising the meeting.

The plantation union leadership, who are fully aware of the Modi government's intensifying attacks on the Indian working class and the recent frame-up and life imprisonment of 13 militant workers at the Maruti Suzuki car plant, cynically promoted Modi as a friend of the plantation workers.

In order to encourage the plantation workers to attend the Norwood meeting, the unions issued a series of communalist appeals, reminding the workers of their ethnic Indian origins and offering free transport.

On May 6, *Veerakesari*, a Tamil-language daily, published NUW leader Digambaram's call for workers to attend the event and "express [their] everlasting umbilical relationship" with India. "Our people and future generations must benefit from the Indian government."

Digambaram, who is Sri Lanka's Hill Country, New Villages, Infrastructure and Community Development

minister, declared that the Indian government had provided education, healthcare and vocational training and was building 4,000 houses for plantation workers. This contribution, along with houses and lands being provided by the Sri Lankan government, he claimed, was creating cultural unity and plantation workers should "show their gratitude."

The following day, UPF leader V. Radhakrishnan, the State Minister for Education, told the newspaper that many benefits could be obtained from the Indian government, including the construction of an Up-Country area university.

Union claims that the Indian and Sri Lankan governments are assisting plantation workers are false. Meagre support from the Indian government is not motivated by concern about the plight of these low-paid workers. Its purpose is to strengthen New Delhi's political relationships with the plantation union bureaucrats and the Sri Lankan government, which, like all its predecessors, is directly responsible for the plight of these workers.

While an estimated 30,000 workers attended the meeting, this was not out of enthusiasm for Modi. The government spent about 20 million rupees, over \$US130,000, on buses and other expenses to transport workers from their plantations to the meeting.

The unions also attempted to use the event to boost their own flagging support in the plantations, where they are widely discredited amongst workers who rightly regard them as representatives of the plantation bosses and the government. In September last year, tens of thousands of workers held daily protests demanding higher wages. The unions intervened to halt these struggles, promising improved conditions for workers, but ultimately assisting the companies to impose their attacks on jobs, wages and higher productivity demands.

Addressing the Norwood meeting, Modi issued various empty platitudes and promised to build an additional 10,000 homes in the central hills district.

Those who originally came from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu to the Sri Lankan plantations, he declared,

had faced an “uphill” journey and their struggles were hard, “but they never gave up... You encountered the stiff challenge of making your own mark and identity in a newly independent nation. But, you faced them boldly; you fought for your rights, but you did so peacefully.”

Modi said nothing about the fact that these workers were forcibly transported by the British colonial rulers to the island and treated as virtual slaves. Nor did he mention that they faced ongoing discrimination at the hands of Sri Lankan governments following formal independence in 1948, including the abolition of citizenship rights and other policies to divide Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking workers.

An *Indian Express* article on May 13 commented that Modi’s trip to the plantations “breaks new ground,” but is in line with New Delhi’s decision to give “special consideration” to the “Indian origin Tamils.” Modi’s bogus concerns about plantation workers, however, are driven by geo-strategic considerations.

The Indian government supported the US regime-change operation in the 2015 Sri Lankan presidential election, which removed former President Mahinda Rajapakse and replaced him with the pro-Washington Maithripala Sirisena. While Washington and New Delhi backed Rajapakse’s war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and his anti-democratic methods of rule, they were hostile to his political and economic relations with China.

Modi’s visit to Sri Lanka is to ensure that Colombo remains firmly in line with Washington’s geo-strategic build up against China. In recent months, the Modi administration has voiced its concerns about the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government turning back to China for support in an attempt to overcome Sri Lanka’s mounting financial crisis. Modi’s cultivation of connections with the plantation union leadership is part of his efforts to develop relations with other sections of the Sri Lankan political establishment.

There are certain similarities between Modi’s recent trip and the 1939 visit to the plantations by Indian Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru, who later became the first Indian prime minister. On the eve of World War II, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) led massive workers’ struggles in the country. Thousands of Sinhala and Tamil workers rallied behind the LSSP, which demanded independence from British colonial rule and called for various socialist measures. In 1942, the LSSP leaders formed the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India as a section of the Fourth International.

Nehru, who feared the developing unity of workers across the Indian sub-continent, tried to divide plantation workers on the island from their Sinhala counterparts by helping establish the India-Ceylon Congress, whose membership

was determined by Indian ethnicity. Its first leader, S. Thondaman, later founded the Ceylon Workers Congress or CWC in 1950, which has consistently dissipated estate workers’ demands and defended plantation companies’ profits.

The Indian ruling elite—past and present—has no interest in Sri Lankan plantation workers’ wages, working conditions and basic rights. In 1964, Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri signed an agreement with Sri Lankan Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike to repatriate over half a million plantation workers to Tamil Nadu. Forced back to India, those workers became more or less destitute and a source of cheap labour.

In the latter part of 1987, New Delhi sent troops to the north and east under the Indo-Lanka Accord signed between President J. Jayawardene and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Its purpose was to disarm the LTTE, defend the Sri Lankan state and maintain strategic influence on the island. The invasion resulted in the deaths of thousands of Tamils in Sri Lanka’s north-east.

The true friends of the plantation workers, and all other sections of the Sri Lankan working class, are not India’s bourgeois rulers but the multi-millioned Indian working class. Workers must reject the trade unions and political parties that seek to build relationships with imperialism and regional powers for their own interests. Sri Lanka workers can fight for their rights only by uniting with their brothers and sisters in India as part of the struggle for socialism across the entire Indian sub-continent and internationally.

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