

Sri Lankan plantation workers protest job cuts and new productivity demands

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Strike action and protests by plantation workers at several estates in Sri Lanka's Nuwara Eliya district have erupted in recent weeks over new productivity demands, the dismantling of tea estates and cuts in wages and jobs. The management attacks have the full backing of the government and the trade unions.

* On September 10, nearly 200 workers from the Henfold tea estate in Hatton held a protest picket against the leasing of six hectares of land to a foreign-based business for corn cultivation. The estate is managed by the Watawala Plantation Company.

* On September 7, Strathdon estate workers, also in Hatton, walked out on strike and demonstrated against wage cutting and the abandonment of tea cultivation in a section of the estate.

* Nethastal division workers at the Glasgow estate also struck recently to protest against company plans to replace tea bushes with turpentine trees in some parts of the estate. Company management temporarily abandoned the plan in response to the walkout.

The strikes and demonstrations are part of a growing wave of industrial action and working-class struggles against Colombo's big-business program.

Henfold workers, who were concerned about the destruction of jobs at their estate, contacted P. Digambaram who leads the National Union of Workers (NUW) and is also Sri Lanka's plantation infrastructure minister. He brushed aside workers fears, claiming that management had assured him that the corn cultivation was only for three months and the land would revert to tea production. He demanded an end to the protest, telling workers that the manager was a good person.

As one Henfold estate worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "If tea cultivation is transformed into corn cultivation, many workers will lose their jobs. That is why we are protesting. The trade unions, however, support management implementing this plan.

Management previously closed down and abandoned 22 out of 112 hectares of tea plantation in this division."

Digambaram's intervention, the worker continued, "helped the company. We don't believe the company will stop corn cultivation if it is investing millions of rupees. Digambaram is cheating us."

While the company now claims to have discontinued corn cultivation, its plan has not been abandoned. Two other divisions of the estate have already started cultivating corn over a total of four hectares.

Commenting on demands for increased productivity at other plantations, a Strathdon estate worker said: "Most of the workers have not been paid full wages since May this year and have lost about 3,000 rupees [\$US19.60] per month. The company wants 19kg [of tea] plucked per day but we can't reach this target.

"During the rain season the maximum we can get per day is only 15kg and because of that every worker lost the 140-rupee daily productivity allowance. Also, if a worker plucks less than 15kg they are only paid a half day's wages. How can we live with these wage cuts under today's skyrocketing cost of living?"

Other estate workers denounced the plantation unions and said they were betrayed when the unions signed the last collective agreement that allows management to cut wages and increase workloads.

Estate managements are deliberately abandoning estate land, not clearing weeds and bushes, and not using fertiliser and other chemicals. Where previously 15 workers were employed to clear and weed about two hectares a day, now only two workers have to cover the same areas. Wild shrubs have grown in many places, breeding grounds for leeches, snakes and sometimes wild leopards.

A Glasgow estate worker detailed the intolerable workload at her plantation: "We have to pluck 18kg of tea leaves per day but cannot reach this target during the rains

in March, April and May. Because of that we lost the 140-rupee productivity allowance and the 60-rupee incentive payment.”

Another tea plucker said: We can't reach [management's] target because of the bad condition of the estate and so we lose allowances. Many workers are now employed on a casual basis, some of them even for seven years. Some retired workers have been reappointed as casual workers in order to cut costs.”

“I don't have a house,” the mother of three children continued. “For several years we've been living at a relative's house. The trade unions are doing nothing and the government has cheated us.”

Management attacks on workers at the Henfold, Strathdon and Glasgow estates are part of a broader assault on plantation workers' jobs and social conditions.

Watawala Plantations has initiated a dairy farm project at its Lonach estate with a Singapore-based investment company. Beginning with 400 cows, it will be expanded to carry 2,000 cows. The company wants to end all tea cultivation at Lonach and use the land for the dairy farm. Watawala Plantation plans to transfer workers from Lonach to its Tharawela estate.

At the same time, plantation companies have begun imposing a new revenue system that assigns plots of land with about 1,000 or more tea bushes to individual workers and/or their families to maintain.

The worker is provided with fertiliser, agricultural implements and other inputs but must handover the harvest to the company's factory. In exchange the worker receives a share of the income but only after company has deducted its “input costs.” The system transforms waged tea plantation workers into share-croppers with the loss of previous hard-won conditions and rights.

Kelani Valley Plantations implemented this system in April at its Battalgalla estate in Dickoya. Mathurata Plantations began imposing these measures at its Mao Uva estate in October last year.

The new share-cropping system, demanded by the Planters Association, is fully backed by the Sri Lankan government. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremasinghe has called on planters “to go beyond a traditional tea cup and explore the industry from fresh perspective in order to outperform others in global arena.” He recently told a convention that the government was preparing new legislation to expand the share-cropping system.

Addressing the “150 years of Ceylon Tea” celebration at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall on August 9, the prime minister declared that the

lower tea prices, higher cost of production, including wage increases, were impacting on plantation companies. “The industry should make a decision about whether it can continue with traditional workers, subcontract the land or think of a combined model,” he said.

Wickremasinghe urged Plantation Industry Minister Naveen Dissanayake to boldly implement the share-cropping plan and referred favourably to his father, Gamini Dissanayake, and his “Accelerated Mahaweli Project” in the late 1970s.

Gamini Dissanayake, then a minister in former President J. R. Jayawardene's government, imposed the so-called Mahaweli Project, brutally expelling peasants from their land and crushing protests by plantation workers employed at several estates that were to be submerged.

Wickremasinghe's reference to the Mahaweli Project is a warning that plantation workers will be confronted with similarly ruthless government attacks.

Naveen Dissanayake assured the convention audience that the government was studying the share-cropping model and appealed for more union support.

“The estate workers are given some land rights over land and the management companies will also have better yields. This model is commonly known as the outgrow model. I hope the union leaders will give us the support required to take the industry forward,” he declared.

Wickremasinghe and Dissanayake's promises are to give the plantation companies more legal clout in suppressing the opposition of estate workers and intensifying the attacks on their basic rights. As the last wage agreement makes clear, the unions have already indicated that they will deepen their collaboration with the companies and the government.

The escalating attacks on plantation workers are part and parcel of the “economic reforms” dictated by the International Monetary Fund. The recent protests of plantation workers are another indication that there is deep-seated opposition to Colombo's austerity measures in the working class and that major political and industrial struggles lie ahead.

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