

Around 100,000 Sri Lankan plantation workers walk out again for pay rise

By our correspondents
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Around 100,000 plantation workers held a one-day strike in Sri Lanka on Monday to demand a 100 percent increase in their daily wage. Estate workers in all of the island's hill districts, including Nuwara-Eliya, Badulla, Kandy, Matale, Kegalla, Ratnapura and Kalutara, and in the capital, Colombo, participated in the industrial action.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) plantation union called the walkout but did not organise any demonstrations. Despite this, workers held protests and rallies for up to three hours in various districts. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers from other industries backed the strike, while shopkeepers in the major plantation towns closed their shops to register their support.

The plantation workers have been holding daily protests on their respective estates since early October. The National Union of Workers (NUW), supported by the Democratic People's Front (DPF) and Up-country People's Front (UPF), however, have kept the demonstrations isolated from one another.

Monday's walkout was similarly limited to one day, with CWC officials ordering workers to remain at their estates. The NUW and DPF refused to endorse Monday's strike, but their members nevertheless joined it.

The plantation unions, which also function as political parties, are determined to prevent these wage struggles from escalating out of their control and sparking mass industrial action by other workers, which would lead to a political confrontation with the government.

The unions played the same role earlier this year when railway, postal, water board, university and other workers took industrial action and held demonstrations demanding higher pay and improved working

conditions.

When President Maithripala Sirisena unconstitutionally removed Wickremesinghe as prime minister, and replaced him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse on October 26, the plantation unions worked to contain the wages struggle and prevent plantation workers from compounding the political crisis.

Plantation union leaders have been ministers in, and political advocates of, both the Rajapakse and Sirisena-Wickremesinghe governments, and have loyally backed their attacks on workers' living conditions.

CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman became a cabinet minister in the newly appointed Rajapakse administration, and immediately claimed that the new prime minister had promised that plantation workers would receive a 100 percent pay rise. Rajapakse's "promise," of course, was bogus. It was just part of his manoeuvres to secure a parliamentary majority.

For their part, P. Digambaram and Mano Ganeshan, leaders of the NUW and DPF respectively, who previously held ministerial positions in Wickremesinghe's administration, backed the deposed prime minister and his United National Party (UNP)-led faction.

The CWC was forced to call this week's one-day strike in a desperate attempt to dissipate their employees' anger. The plantation workers' collective agreement ended on October 31, yet nothing has come of Rajapakse's fraudulent pay rise promise.

CWC chief Arumugam Thondaman called a press conference in Kotagala after Monday's walkout, declaring that the strike was a "great victory" and claiming it would "put pressure on companies and show the people's strength to the government."

Thondaman's claims, like Rajapakse's "promise," are meaningless. As in the past, the CWC and the other plantation unions will continue to hold back-room discussions with the companies, and then seek to impose their demands on the workers.

The plantation companies have consistently rejected workers' demands for a 100 percent wage increase, offering instead a meagre 20 percent, or 100-rupee, increase on the current basic daily wage of 500 rupees (\$US2.70).

Last week Employers Federation of Ceylon Plantation Services Group chairman Roshan Rajadurai told the media that it was impossible to grant workers' wage demands amid declining tea prices and rising production costs.

"Around 35 percent of our teas are unsold due to market conditions; prices are coming down," he said. "Our teas are expensive; there are teas of the same quality at lower prices in the world market from countries such as India."

Rajadurai repeated the plantation chief's previous 20 percent pay "offer" and claimed that workers could earn an extra 400 rupees through additional allowances tied to productivity.

On Monday, striking workers denounced the unions and the government. A worker from the Ottery estate in Dick-Oya, near Hatton, told the WSWS: "We joined the strike to establish workers' unity, but we don't have any faith that the CWC or the other trade union leaders will fight for our demands.

"We demonstrated for our wage demand in Dick-Oya town on October 26, the same day that President Sirisena appointed Rajapakse as prime minister. After that the trade union leaders told us to forget about our wage issue."

On Sunday, a day before this week's strike, Rajapakse issued a public statement declaring that Sri Lanka was on the brink of economic collapse and compared it to the situation that faced Greece three years ago. He pledged that his government would "strictly" control public expenditure and that the people must support him "like during the war period and build the country."

Mangala Samaraweera, a former finance minister and a leader of Wickremesinghe's faction, also warned that Sri Lanka was near economic collapse and referred to Greece. Political stability, he said, could only be

established by allowing the Wickremesinghe faction to rule.

These references to the Greek financial crisis make clear that whichever political faction finally seizes control of the government, it will unleash similar attacks on the jobs, wages and social rights of Sri Lankan workers to those imposed on the Greek workers, on the orders of big business and international finance capital.

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