

Sri Lankan plantation strike: Abbotsleigh workers march to demand action committees and socialist policies

By our reporters
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Around 50 workers from the Abbotsleigh tea estate in Sri Lanka's central hills district marched for three hours to Hatton town yesterday, urging plantation workers to build action committees and fight for socialist policies.

The politically significant demonstration occurred amid ongoing national strike action by more than 100,000 Sri Lankan plantation workers who walked out indefinitely on Tuesday to demand a 100 percent daily wage increase. Yesterday's march was organised by an action committee of Abbotsleigh Estate workers following political interventions by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

Tea estate workers began their march at 11 a.m., near Abbotsleigh tea factory, and reached Aluthgala Bridge, near Hatton, at 2 p.m., after trekking through the Abbotsleigh, Marlborough, Strathdon and Dickoya estates.

Marchers chanted slogans and carried placards demanding a 40,000-rupee monthly salary and calling for their fellow workers to "Build action committees independent of the trade unions!" "Fight for an international socialist program!" "Build a workers' and peasants' government!" "Immediately release Maruti-Suzuki workers imprisoned in India!" and "Support General Motors workers fighting against plant closures!"

Many workers watching the march also began chanting some of these slogans and hundreds of copies of the WSWs article, "Sri Lankan plantation workers launch indefinite strike for 100 percent pay rise" were distributed.

Plantation workers, one of the most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class, have been

holding daily protests since early October to demand the doubling of their daily wage. Rallies and demonstrations were also reported yesterday in Kotagala, Bogawantalwa, Yatiyantota, Deraniyagala and Kandy.

The indefinite national walkout is at a critical turning point. It follows the plantation companies' repeated rejection of workers' wage demands and divisive tactics by the unions.

On Wednesday, the Planters Association of Ceylon (PA), which is determined to break the strike, again rejected workers' demands and claimed that if the strike continued, tea and rubber plantation companies would lose around 240 to 250 million rupees per day.

The Planters Association wants the daily wage system abolished and replaced with a so-called "revenue share" scheme, which it claims is a "viable" solution for the industry. Under this system, workers and their families are allocated a plot of a 1,000 or more tea bushes. The family, which is forced to maintain and pick the crop, is promised a share of the income derived, after the company deducts its expenses and profits.

This deeply unpopular scheme deepens the exploitation of workers and their families, transforming them into share-croppers and abolishing meagre benefits, such the Employees' Provident Fund, won in previous struggles. In some of the estates where this scheme has been imposed, workers are demanding it be abolished because they cannot earn enough to live, despite their whole family being involved in the work.

This week's national strike was called by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the largest plantation union, in an attempt to dissipate seething anger among

workers over their declining living conditions. It follows numerous futile discussions between the CWC leadership and the PA and the Employers Federation.

Rival plantation unions—the National Union of Workers (NUW), the Democratic People’s Front (DPF) and the Up-country People’s Front (UPF)—have told their members not to support the indefinite strike. Members of these unions, however, have defied this divisive directive and taken industrial action in many estates.

Sri Lankan plantation unions, which also operate as political organisations and function as an industrial police force, have lined up behind the different political factions of the ruling elite bitterly fighting to win government.

CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman, for example, is supporting Mahinda Rajapakse who was appointed prime minister by President Maithripala Sirisena after he sacked Ranil Wickremesinghe in a political coup on October 26.

P. Digambaram, Mano Ganeshan and P. Radhakrishnan, leaders of the NUW, the DPF and the UPF respectively, were ministers in the previous government and support Wickremesinghe.

SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena addressed the Abbotsleigh workers after yesterday’s march, hailing their decisive action and explaining the political issues they confront. His speech was translated into Tamil by M. Thevarajah, who is also from the SEP leadership.

Wijesiriwardena said the workers’ decision, in defiance of company and union pressures, to establish an action committee and organise the march was a significant step. The Abbotsleigh estate action committee, a new form of organisation, he said, was critical. “The SEP proposed action committees, independent of trade unions because the unions do not represent the interests of workers.”

The march was not limited to economic demands, he continued. “Participants chanted political slogans that represent the interests of the whole working class. The most important character of the march was its orientation towards the unity of the international working class and socialism. Workers internationally face the same situation because the capitalist class wants to impose the burden of the deepening economic crisis.”

Wijesiriwardena referred to the struggle confronting General Motors workers in the US and Canada, who face plant closures and layoffs, and Maruti-Suzuki workers in India fighting to free their colleagues who are serving life imprisonment because they dared to struggle for better working conditions.

“The international working class,” he said, “is exploited by a global chain of banks, transnational companies and their clients in countries like Sri Lanka. The trade unions are with them and help to protect their profits.”

Wijesiriwardena called for unified action by plantation workers and other Sri Lankan workers, explaining that they all confront the same austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund and imposed by the government. He urged the marchers to fight for action committees in other estates, workplaces and neighbourhoods and to unleash their united strength.

Wijesiriwardena declared: “The working class needs an international strategy and organisation to fight capitalism. The only strategy for the working class is international socialism and the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government. For that, workers need a revolutionary party, which is the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.”

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