

# Sri Lankan plantation workers defy union and continue to strike

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The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) attempted on Tuesday to call off an indefinite strike involving tens of thousands of Sri Lankan plantation workers demanding a 100 percent pay increase. Thousands of workers have continued the stoppage, which began on December 4, in direct defiance of the union.

CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman announced the end of the industrial action after a closed-room discussion with President Maithripala Sirisena. Thondaman made clear the union was seeking to suppress the struggle at the behest of the president. He touted vague pledges from Sirisena to resolve the dispute at a meeting with the Employers Federation of Ceylon on December 19.

Thondaman told the media the president had said “a wage increment should be given to estate workers, meanwhile the estates also should be saved. He said he will meet the Employers’ Federation of Ceylon and get a good solution for our demands. He requested that we stop the strike today taking consideration of the situation in the country. According to his request we agreed and stopped the strike.”

Thousands of workers have expressed their hostility to this craven capitulation. They continued the strike on Wednesday and rallied throughout the plantation district.

The Abbotsleigh Estate workers’ action committee, formed after an intervention by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), held a protest that was joined by workers from the Panmoor Estate.

The protesters picketed the Fruit Hill junction of Hatton, a major town in the Central Hills District. They chanted slogans including: “All the trade unions betrayed our struggle,” “No to a collective agreement,” “Quit the trade unions,” “Build workers’ action committees independent of the unions,” “Pay

plantation workers a 40,000-rupee monthly wage,” “For a workers’ and peasants’ government” and “Workers of the world unite.”

Addressing the workers, SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah called for the establishment of action committees throughout the estates in opposition to the unions. “All the trade unions are betraying this struggle,” he stated. “This makes clear that workers cannot win their rights through the unions.”

Thevarajah continued: “Workers need new organisations and a new perspective. Workers’ actions committees should be built in every estate. The estates must be placed under the democratic control of the workers. Workers’ struggles are emerging internationally, especially in France and the United States. We must unite our fight with these workers, and with workers all over the world.”

Workers from the upper and lower divisions of Sanjimalai in Dickoya, a town in the Central Province, also held a protest against the CWC. They chanted “Thondaman betrayed estate workers as a whole.”

Workers from the Madakumbura Estate in the town of Talawakele burned Thondaman’s effigy in a demonstration in front of the estate factory. They condemned Thondaman as a “giant leech that sucks the blood of workers.”

Protests were also held at estates in Dayagama, a town near Talawakele. Workers from the Upcot area held a demonstration blocking the Maskeliya road. Delhousie workers nearby also rallied.

Plantation workers, one of the most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class, currently receive a basic daily wage of just 500 rupees (\$US2.8). They are demanding that it be doubled.

The plantation employers have repeatedly rejected the call. A Planters Association of Ceylon (PA) issued

a statement last Friday said that workers' demands cannot be met under any circumstance.

The Planters Association, with the assistance of the unions, is also attempting to impose a "revenue-sharing" system. Under the scheme, 1,000 or more tea bushes are allocated to a worker's family to maintain and harvest. They receive a portion of the income after the company's costs and profits have been deducted. The proposal is aimed at reducing workers to sharecroppers and scrapping meager benefits such as the Employees' Provident Fund.

All of the unions, including the CWC, have repeatedly opposed any campaign to increase plantation workers' wages. The movement for a 100 percent increase emerged in opposition to the unions.

The CWC called the strike to control the mounting opposition among workers. At the same time, it has done everything possible to prevent the stoppage from spreading to other sections of workers.

The CWC is determined to prevent the plantation workers' struggle from becoming a focal point for a confrontation of the entire working class with the government, and the capitalist system that it defends.

The entire political establishment is terrified of an independent intervention of the working class into the ongoing crisis triggered by the October 26 sacking of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and installation of Mahinda Rajapaksa in an unconstitutional political coup.

The plantation unions function as political parties and have been partners of successive governments led by the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

After the ouster of Wickremesinghe, Thondaman was given a cabinet post in the new government. He claimed that Rajapakse had "promised" to offer plantation workers a wage increase.

Other plantation unions, including the National Union of Workers, the Democratic Workers' Congress and the Upcountry Peoples' Front, are partners with Wickremesinghe's UNP. All of them have enforced the attacks on workers dictated to Colombo by the International Monetary Fund.

The record demonstrates that the statements of Thondaman, and all of the union leaders, are lies.

On Tuesday, the plantation employers refused direct talks with the unions for a new Collective Agreement.

The business group claimed that it had received "death threats" from workers. This unsubstantiated allegation is a clear call for state repression to crush the striking plantation workers.

The plantation workers' struggle is part of an international upsurge of the working class, stemming from the breakdown of world capitalism. To go forward, plantation workers need to break with the unions and establish new forms of organisation, including action committees.

Above all, what is required is a unified struggle by the entire working class for the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government, as part of the fight for international socialism.

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