

Sri Lankan plantation workers end strike action under protest

By Saman Gunadasa
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Thousands of plantation workers ended their recent wage strike yesterday, two days after the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union, ordered them to end all industrial action on December 12. Workers greeted the union's "return to work" order and betrayal of the strike with angry demonstrations in provincial towns and estates.

The strike for a 1,000-rupee daily wage—a 100 percent increase of the current 500-rupee (\$US2.80) rate—began on December 4. Demonstrations, marches and rallies took place in plantation areas across the country, including Nuwaraeliya, Badulla, Kandy, Kegalle, Ratnapura, Kalutara and in Colombo district.

The CWC called the strike, not to mobilise workers to win higher pay, but to dissipate workers' intense anger over the collaboration of the unions with estate management and Sri Lankan governments to impose starvation-level wages and miserable working and living conditions.

CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman announced the end of the strike on Tuesday, claiming that President Maithripala Sirisena had promised him and other leading union officials in a closed door meeting that he would resolve the wage dispute at a discussion with the plantation companies on December 19.

Thondaman is politically aligned with Sirisena and was given a ministry position in the cabinet appointed by Sirisena after he unconstitutionally sacked United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister on October 26 and replaced him with former President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Rival plantation unions, such as the National Union of Workers (NUW), Democratic People's Front (DPF) and Upcountry People's Front (UPF), are aligned with Wickremesinghe and the UNP and opposed the strike. Members of those unions joined the strike in defiance

of their union officials.

Workers denounced the CWC's betrayal at protests across Sri Lanka on Wednesday. These were organised by workers themselves and reflected the widespread anger and contempt over the union's betrayal.

Rallies and demonstrations were held by workers from the Couvlina, Maria and Henfold estates in the Lindula-Talawakelle area; eight divisions of the Brunswick estate in Maskeliya; the Albion, New Grostan, Adrlaw, Thonfield, St Market, Torrington, Katamasan and Agra Alpetha estates in Agarapathana; and the Abbotsleigh Estate in the Hatton district. Hundreds of workers also demonstrated at midday in the provincial town of Holbrook.

Yesterday at the Abbotsleigh Estate, where workers established an action committee with the assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), about 70 workers picketed the factory gate before returning to work.

SEP Political Committee member M. Thevarajah addressed these workers explaining that the plantation union's betrayal vindicated the necessity for the establishment of action committees. These committees, he said, were needed to organise workers independently of the trade unions.

The action committee, he continued, should "discuss with workers in other estates and workers in other countries. We must go forward to fight for our own workers' and peasants' government.

"The unions consciously work to divide workers. At the Montifiore division, Digambaran's union [the NUW] sent its members back to work on the second day of the strike. The Abbotsleigh action committee had to intervene and explain that workers' demands for better wages and conditions should not be determined by the CWC or Digambaran's union but the workers themselves.

“The capitalist rulers seek to offset their economic crisis at the expense of working class. This is the situation not just in the Sri Lankan tea industry but also in the developed countries. Auto workers in United States are fighting against plant closures and the “Yellow Vest” movement in France has shaken capitalist rule in that country.

“In 1917 workers in Russia established the first workers’ government in the world. Even though it degenerated under Stalinism, the Fourth International fought that betrayal and has continued this struggle ever since. It is now prepared to lead the workers of the world to win international socialism.”

The picketing Abbotsleigh workers unanimously voted to hold a meeting on December 16 to develop their action committee. They chanted slogans: “Workers of the World unite,” “Build action committees in every estate” and “Fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government.”

Sivapakyam, one of the protesting Abbotsleigh workers, told the WSWS: “No trade union needs to come to this estate. We will build up our action committee and, through it, fight to defend our rights. The unions should not come here canvassing for elections.”

Yogaranjani, from the CWC women’s wing, said: “[CWC leader] Arumugam Thondaman said he will fight for a 1,000-rupee wage for us but the union has been discussing this since August with no result. Now he says the wage problem will be resolved in a December 19 discussion with the president. Why should we expect a different result?

“My fellow workers are now questioning me. We will stop paying subscriptions to trade unions. We cannot be deceived as we previously were. Things are now clear to us,” Yogaranjani [photo] added, and pledged her support for the Abbotsleigh action committee.

WSWS reporters also spoke with about 30 striking workers from the Montifiore division of the Abbotsleigh Estate. Two rival union leaders and a CWC official were attempting to convince workers that CWC chief Thondaman would secure a pay rise from President Sirisena.

SEP Political Committee member Thevarajah addressed the Montifiore workers, explaining the necessity of establishing an action committee

independent of the unions and inviting them to the December 16 meeting.

On December 12, local union leaders from tea and rubber estates in Deraniyagala, Kegalle, Dehiowita and Yatiyantota held a media conference, calling on workers to not pay their respective membership dues and only join a union that achieved a pay rise. All of the unions, however, are complicit in the suppression of any struggle for decent pay and conditions.

The estate-level union leaders’ media conference was a desperate attempt to promote illusions in the unions. However, tens of thousands of plantation workers are realising through their own experiences the pro-capitalist character of these formations. Plantation workers must reject these cynical manoeuvres and break, politically and organisationally, from the unions.

While plantation workers continued their strike action for two days in defiance of the union leadership, their return to work raises the urgent need for a deeper understanding of the political tasks they confront.

What is required is the establishment of independent action committees in all plantations and a turn made to other sections of the Sri Lankan working class to develop a unified struggle against big business and the government for decent wages, better working and living conditions and other basic social rights.

These action committees must base themselves on a socialist and internationalist program that places the needs of all working people above the super profits of the massive tea conglomerates and other sections of big business and their political servants.

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