

Frontline Socialist Party prepares political trap for Sri Lankan plantation workers

By K. Ratnayake
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The Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and organisations linked to it are seeking to divert a protracted struggle by plantation workers for decent wages and improved conditions into futile appeals to the estate owners and the Sri Lankan government.

The pseudo-left formation's campaign is a response to the deepening crisis of the Sri Lankan ruling elite and the growing hostility of estate workers to the plantation trade unions. The FSP is determined to prevent plantation workers from breaking with the unions and developing an independent struggle against the employers, the government and the capitalist system.

Over 100,000 estate workers struck for nine days last December to demand a 1,000-rupee daily wage (\$US5.50)—a 100 percent increase. The nationwide walkout was betrayed by the plantation unions which ended the strike.

In January, with government support, the unions signed a backroom agreement with the plantation companies. The sell-out deal included a nominal wage rise—from 500 to 700 rupees—but tied it to backbreaking productivity increases.

The FSP was established in 2012 by a breakaway faction of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) which had been thoroughly discredited by its support for Colombo's communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the government's attacks on democratic rights. FSP founders declared that they had differences with the JVP and claimed to have engaged in "self-criticism" and to have moved to the "left."

The FSP has called for a broad left alliance involving its front groups—the so-called "1,000 [rupee] movement," the Estate Workers Centre, the Centre of Workers Struggles, the National Struggle Centre—and other "left" groups and the trade unions as well as the JVP.

On February 4, the FSP's Estate Workers Centre

(EWC) held a conference in the plantation town of Bandarawela, alongside a series of public meetings.

FSP leader and EWC secretary Duminda Nagamuwa's address to the February 4 conference was politically revealing.

Nagamuwa commented on the dire social conditions in the estates, contrasting them with the huge profits being made the plantation companies. Paying estate workers a 1,000-rupee daily wage, he proclaimed, would not create any problems. He also criticised the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) for signing the sell-out collective agreement.

In typical opportunist fashion, Nagamuwa proclaimed that that "the best opportunities for winning" a 1,000-rupee daily basic wage are "at hand."

The most important of these "opportunities," he said, were forthcoming elections, including for the presidency, over the next nine months.

"All political parties will come to demand your vote. If we can build a broad mass movement in the coming months we can win," he said. Nagamuwa referred to the backing of the "1,000 movement" by the unions, student groups and other organisations.

In other words, the FSP's "broad front" campaign is directed towards pressuring the government, the capitalist parties and the companies into granting the plantation workers' demand for a 1,000-rupee daily basic wage. This is a cynical attempt to revive illusions that have been shattered by the bitter experiences of workers over the past four months alone.

While reaping huge profits, the plantation companies face intense competition from other tea-producing countries and want drastic increases in production and cuts in labour costs, to protect their bottom line. This is indicated by the paltry daily wage increase in the collective agreement and new, even more ruthless,

productivity demands.

Other members of the FSP's "1,000 movement," include the pro-capitalist Movement for Agriculture and Land Reform (Monlar), the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), the Free Trade Zone and General Workers Union (FTZGWU) and the so-called Praxis Collective.

Monlar and other NGOs, together with the CTU, FTZGWU and various fake left organisations, fully endorsed the US-orchestrated regime change operation to bring Maithripala Sirisena to power in the 2015 presidential election. Washington was hostile to President Mahinda Rajapakse and backed his ouster because of his political relations with Beijing.

The CTU and the FTZGWU have a long and sordid record of betraying workers in their respective sectors. For its part, the Praxis Collective looks to Chantal Mouffe, a leading theoretician of so-called "left populism" who backed Syriza in Greece. The Syriza government has imposed the dictates of the European banks and financial institutions for crippling austerity measures targeting the working class and the poor.

The defining feature of all these formations, including the FSP, is their hostility to the fight for socialism and their acute nervousness over the growing rebellion of workers, in Sri Lanka and internationally, against the trade unions.

Most of the protests and strikes in the plantations over the past four months erupted in defiance of the unions.

Sri Lanka's plantation unions—the CWC, the LJEWU, the National Union of Workers, the Democratic People's Front and the Up-country People's Front—are thoroughly discredited because they function as an industrial police force for the plantation companies. Most of the union heads have been appointed ministers in past or present capitalist governments.

This is why the Socialist Equality Party's call for the establishment of independent workers' action committees won important support and was taken up by plantation workers at the Abbotsleigh Estate.

Plantation workers need to beware of the pseudo-left FSP and its various associates. Notwithstanding their "criticisms" of the plantation unions, these groups oppose workers organising as an independent political force.

The FSP urges estate workers to build a common trade union to "fight for the right to land, a house and a private address, and to win a monthly wage," but does advance a socialist and internationalist perspective. In other words, the pseudo-left organisation is seeking to subordinate plantation workers to the capitalist system that is

responsible for the social crisis they confront.

In reality, decades of experience have demonstrated that plantation workers cannot improve their living and social conditions and have a decent life while the large plantations are owned and controlled by the corporations.

The escalating assaults on estate workers by the plantation companies and the government are part of a broader onslaught against the working class and its basic rights in every country.

The government confronts a mounting debt crisis and is totally committed to implementing the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund, including job destruction, the privatisation of state-owned industries and the gutting of welfare programs and subsidies to the poor.

The only way the working class and the poor can improve their living standards and secure a decent future is for the large plantations, banks and major companies to be placed under public ownership and workers' control. This requires the fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on a revolutionary socialist program. Such a struggle can only be carried forward by uniting with the international working class.

Nationalist organisations such like the FSP are hostile to such a program. The FSP promoted illusions in Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain from the outset. It hailed them as models for broad popular movements and then covered up their attacks on Greek and Spanish workers. The FSP is taking the same reactionary path in Sri Lanka.

The SEP urges workers, young people and progressive intellectuals to reject the political trap being set by the FSP and attend the conference called by the Abbotsleigh Estate Workers' Action Committee on March 17 at Hatton Town Hall. The conference, which is entitled "The lessons of the plantation workers' struggle and the way forward to win wages and social rights," is aimed at opening up a genuine political discussion on the issues facing estate workers.

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