

# A visit to the workers' quarters at a Unilever tea plantation in Kenya

By our correspondents  
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WSWS correspondents visited the workers' quarters in the Unilever-owned tea plantation in Kericho County in Kenya. Unilever's estate, the largest in Kenya, reportedly covers 8,700 hectares. It employs 5,500 permanent workers and several thousand seasonal workers (see: "How giant tea companies exploit Kenyan plantation workers").

Around 6.30 in the morning we met 10 workers and a supervisor who came with a trailer, attached to a tractor, carrying several tea plucking machines. Workers unloaded the machines and arranged them on the ground. Then each group of 2-3 workers took a machine and went to areas specified by the supervisor. Some machines were not in good condition.

The supervisor told us that he had been given a target by his manager and would have to achieve it with the groups of workers.

Two workers operated each machine, cutting leaves and filling sacks. Then the sacks were unloaded to another sack, which one worker carried to a distant weighing centre. Another worker sorted the leaves at the weighing centre.

The workers lived in two varieties of "houses" in villages inside the plantation. The "bachelors' quarters" have one room, while the others have two rooms. Several houses share each toilet.

According to workers, most of the single-room houses were allocated to seasonal workers, who must quit them after they are dismissed for the season. One or more families lived in the two-room houses. Workers used firewood for cooking, so they must store their firewood inside the rooms, due to rainy weather.

This housing reminded us of the harsh accommodation provided for tea plantation workers in India and Sri Lanka. The small spaces and poor condition of the houses are similar to the "lines"

(houses in row) in Sri Lankan tea plantations.

Simon, a middle-aged worker, was washing a motor bike in front of his house. When we asked why he was not at work, he explained he was an out-of-work seasonal worker. He said he used his bike and ran a business to make a living during the off seasons. His wife was a permanent worker in the plantation and therefore he could live in the house with the children. He said the wage rate was so low that sometimes he could earn more from his outside work.

On the next small plot of land, we met a worker tilling the ground to cultivate cabbages. He said he had no work in the plantation.

Then we spoke to several young workers who were sitting outside their houses in the village compound. They too were seasonal workers. They were living with their siblings or family members and waiting for work in the plantation.

As it was difficult to find other jobs, the only option for them was to wait for the seasonal work. Most had left school early to earn a living.

Silas, young worker, said he had to stop schooling to help his family, by working as a seasonal worker. When seasonal workers' jobs were terminated, they tried to do odd jobs in nearby areas, he explained.

His friends sarcastically said company representatives attempted to teach them how to save a portion of their wages for expenses when they were out of work.

Among them there was a college graduate, Gilbert, who had studied chemistry but could not find a job suited to his qualifications. He was waiting for seasonal work while living with his sister, a permanent worker in the plantation.

Two female workers came out to talk to us. Grace, who was pregnant, said she was a permanent worker

but her husband was a seasonal worker. She said she had not gone to work because she was sick. Her friend, Pretty, a seasonal worker, was helping her.

Grace kindly allowed us to look inside her house. We were shocked to see bundles of firewood next to her (and her husband's) sleeping floor space. There was hardly space to even turn around. In the next room, there was a stove with a water pot on the fire. Their few cooking utensils took the available space in that room. Such was their "house."

Our visit showed that Unilever's much-touted "responsible sourcing policy" is a mockery. The claims on the company's website about "fair wages," "fair procedures and remedies" and "equal treatment with respect and dignity" are a fraud. Unilever and other big tea corporations exploit the acute unemployment and lack of education facilities in Kenya to obtain cheap labour and impose harsh living and working conditions.

The British-based Unilever, which owns the "Lipton" tea brand, is the largest tea conglomerate in the world. It earned a net profit of £9.8 billion (\$US12.06 billion) in 2018.

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