



Sri Lanka: A Tale of Two Strikes

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Much of the news the world hears from Sri Lanka centres on either the aftermath of the civil war against the Tamils or the rivalry between the imperialist powers expressed through the mainstream political parties. Two long running trade union disputes, however, reveal the desperate situation facing workers from all communities on the island.

For two years, workers on the country's tea, rubber and coconut plantations, have been demanding a basic daily wage of R1000 (currently approximately £4.30) - a demand endorsed, when he was seeking election, by Ranil Wickremasinghe, the present prime minister. The previous wage contract, agreed in 2016, ran out in November and since then the workers have not been paid. So their campaign, which included district-wide strikes last November and December and on January 23 a demonstration of thousands of workers and their supporters in the capital city, Colombo, was also for back payment at the new rate.

On January 27, the three unions recognised for negotiations were made an offer from the Employers' Federation which, at first sight, appeared to mark a major concession, even if not the whole claim. They proposed to raise the daily rate from R500 to R700 - but this was a completely illusory increase. Since 2016, workers' daily wage has been made up of four elements; the basic wage of R500 and three allowances which together brought actual pay to R730. In the proposed new contract, two of those allowances were withdrawn altogether and the third was increased from R30 to R50. So the real rise in take home pay, was from R730 to R750 - a mere R20 or about seven pence!

On the issue of back pay, the employers agreed to pay one third and the government, also a party to negotiations, will pay two thirds. In other words, the bosses are going to use taxpayers' money to pay workers' wages!

If the offer was insultingly low, the response of the union negotiators was a downright disgrace; two of them, the Ceylon Workers' Congress, led by Arumugan Thondoman and the Lanka Jathica Estate Workers' Union, headed by Wadiwel Suresh accepted the proposal! The third, the Joint Trade Union Centre, led by Mano Ganeshan, however, did reject the deal. As a result, in some eight districts, black flags continued to fly for some days to show the strikes continued after the "settlement". Despite the agreement, however, the government has not yet officially endorsed the deal, even though it was actually negotiated at the prime minister's home.

How could such a derisory offer be accepted by the unions? The answer lies not so much in the intransigence, and greed, of the employers, who are still mainly British corporations, as in the political priorities of the union leaders. Suresh is not only a member of the United National Party of the prime minister, Wickremasinghe, but a minister in his government. Thondoman was previously a cabinet member and remains an MP while Ganeshan is also a minister but represents the Democratic People's Front within the Tamil Progressive Alliance. With elections due within the year, each of them is no doubt jockeying for position.

One feature of the campaign for R1000, and one which could point towards future progress, was the support it received in the main towns and cities, far from the plantation districts. Young activists with families still on the plantations as well as members of Left groups and parties were to the fore in organising demonstrations and meetings in solidarity with striking workers. Against this background, the "1,000 Movement" has been formed and is organising support and solidarity for the plantation workers.

The importance of the plantation dispute has now been underlined by the government's response to a demonstration

planned by the 1000 Movement for today, Sunday, February 24, at Bogawanthalawa, a main urban centre in the plantation region. On February 23, supporters of the 1000 Movement, including other trade unionists and students, were harassed while leafletting for the demo by thugs organised by Palani Digamburan, a junior minister in the government. Subsequently, police stopped them from leafletting, announcing a court order banning the rally on the 24th. Several activists were arrested and taken to a police station but, when more crowds of supporters protested outside, they were eventually released. Now, Digamburan has organised a counter-rally in Bogawanthalawa for Ranil Wickremasinghe himself. In the face of this government offensive, the organisers of the protest demo have postponed their rally until Sunday, March 3.

The formation of the 1000 Movement and the growing popular support for the claims of the plantation workers are certainly to be welcomed but, in the longer term, it is clear that the workers will not make any serious advances either in pay or working and living conditions as long as they are represented by unions led by bourgeois politicians. The 1000 Movement itself is calling for the formation of workers' organisations on the estates, as the plantations are known, and this is a worthwhile initiative, providing they are established as democratic bodies accountable to the rank and file workers. Nonetheless, local organisations can only be one part of the answer and the longer term goal should be the formation of one union for all plantation workers.

How best to work towards that goal; by organising against the existing leaderships in the established unions, by urging workers to leave those unions and join one of those not yet recognised for negotiation or by forming an altogether new union, will be the key question for all plantation workers, whether already unionised or not.

Free Trade Zone strike

Meanwhile, in a very different setting, 500 workers are on strike at ATG, a firm making industrial gloves, located in the Free Trade Zone, close to Colombo's airport. The strike, which began on January 11 was initially called over the sacking of five workers who are leading activists for the Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees Union. The firm was only unionised after an earlier dispute two years ago and it is clear that the management's intention now is to try to break the union. In his response to supporters of the strike in the UK, John Taylor, Chairman of the Board of Directors of ATG, wrote that the firm would "continue to reinforce the dialogue with workers and employee representatives through the workers' council and daily contacts on the shop floor". This clearly means that he will not negotiate with the union, unless he is forced to.

On January 16, union and management were called to a meeting by the Assistant Commissioner of Labour, ACL, for the district but the talks broke down because ATG refused to accept a proposal from the Commissioner General of Labour regarding the sacked workers. Further meetings on January 21 and 24 brought no settlement but, in the meantime, the company obtained a court injunction barring union officials from meeting with the strikers - a clear case of the state authorities intervening on the side of management.

The strikers and their supporters from other trade unions and the general public are now planning a major demonstration at the Free Trade Zone on February 27.

As with most workers in the Free Trade Zone, the strikers, 150 of whom are young women, come from distant villages and are housed in hostels and boarding houses for which they must pay rent. Strike funds are urgently needed and the FTZ&GSEU, which is affiliated to IndustriALL, the international organisation of industrial unions that includes, for example, the RMT in Britain and IG Metall in Germany, has appealed to trade unionists internationally for support. Messages of support and details for donations from ftzunionlanka@gmail.com [1]

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