

# Brewing Wage Struggle of Tea Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is one of the tea exporting countries on a world scale. It has been earning much wanted foreign exchange for the country. Tea garden workers are instrumental in bringing about economic development and foreign exchange to their country. Tens of thousands of workers are toiling in this sector. Most of them are women workers. Most of the workers hail from Sri Lanka's Malayatra Tamil community.

These workers toiled in the tea estates steadily building Sri Lanka's economy by earning precious foreign exchange. These workers pluck tea leaves all the day in rain or shine braving blood sucking leeches or stinging wisps – a very hard work done by them. But their working and living conditions are pathetic. Colonial era exploitation of the tea plantation workers is carried out by the employers even in these modern days. These workers are paid with paltry wages just to barely live. In the present day of severe inflation and economic crisis even those meager wages paid by the employers are insufficient to workers to make both ends meet. The Sri Lankan rupee hit a record low of 166 per dollar and has been dropping further, hitting hard the lives of the tea plantation workers. With the spiraling living costs, even a kilo of rice-staple diet for workers- costs more than 100 Sri Lankan rupees (INR. 44/-) making life for them impossible to bear.

From 2016, the tea plantation workers of Sri Lanka have been agitating to hike their daily basic wage from LKR.220/- with another couple of hundreds by way of incentives and allowances tied to their productivity and attendance, to LKR 1000 (Rs.430). Even this minimum basic wage demanded by the workers is lesser than what a 2018 study done by the Institute of Social Development, Kandy, found the necessary minimum living wage. The necessary living wage according to this institute is LKR 1108 assuming that the worker gets 25 days of work per month. The tea plantation working community is living in a horrible conditions lacking public health, education and housing needs.

The employers who are making huge super profits have been adamant and pay a deaf ear to the just demand of workers. In the name of global competition and cutting the costs of production they are denying the just demand for wages of workers. They are crying hoarsely that the demand of workers for wage hike is unreasonable. The Sri Lankan government is not sympathetic with the workers woes. Some of the plantation trade union leaderships are siding with employers.

However, for the last two years the agitation for wage hike by plantation workers has been persistently growing. These agitations have been spreading outside the confines of their union and location to the capital city Colombo and even as far as Jaffna in the north. Solidarity actions and support from other sectors are steadily growing in support of the tea plantation workers just demand.

In October last year, Colombo's ecosic eplle fasa witnessed a sea of black, when several thousand protestors thronged the beach front calling for a wage hike for tea estate workers. The crowd largely comprised youth from the Malayan Tamil community employed in the capital in various jobs spanning the professional and service sectors. They demanded higher wages for workers highlighting broader concerns about public health, education and housing needs of the community.

However the recent round of negotiations and the subsequent signing of the collective agreement on January 28, 2019, the employers have agreed only to a wage hike up to LKR 855/- against the demand of LKR 1000/-, including ETF/EPF benefits and incentive tied to productivity.

This is how we find that imperialist globalization economic policies playing havoc with the lives of tea plantation workers that is ruthlessly and inhumanly exploiting their labour.

The same has been the state of tea plantation workers in Vietnam, Bangladesh, India and other tea exporting countries. This is the real demonic face of the economic liberalization policies of imperialist globalization that are being portrayed as 'human face' and their so-called inclusiveness.

This state of pathetic plight of tea plantation workers throughout the world stresses on the immediate necessity of waging steady fast struggles by the tea plantation workers and the solidarity they need to be extended from other classes of people in the world.

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