

Sri Lanka: Estate workers : Continue gulping bitter cuppa

Tuesday 24 November 2020, by [GUNASEKARA Skandha](#) (Date first published: 15 November 2020).

The plantation sector workers have gone yet another year without seeing their daily wages increase and their standard of living further deteriorating amidst the Covid-19 pandemic.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, in his election campaign, pledged to increase the daily wage of a plantation sector worker to Rs. 1,000.

Thereafter, the incumbent Government, in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in August, also promised to implement the wage increase for the estate sector to a daily wage of Rs. 1,000.

However, up to date, no such increment has been made, despite direct requests from the Government to the Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) to do so.

“The Government doesn’t need to give instructions to give Rs. 1,000 because the Collective Agreement already allows for a daily wage of Rs. 750. So, the Government only has to instruct to give an additional Rs. 250,” National Estate Workers’ Union General Secretary Vadivel Suresh told *The Sunday Morning*.

He said that the timely increase in wages now would allow the unions to bargain for more at the next Collective Agreement discussions with the plantation companies.

“This extra Rs. 250 has been promised for the past five years. Even the previous Government failed to give it. But now, the cost of living has gone up in 2020 when compared with 2015, so the Rs. 250 is essential. If the Government is able to get the Rs. 250 increment, then we can start negotiations next month for the Collective Agreement at Rs. 1,000.”

He said that the minister in charge of labour too had made a request from the plantation companies.

“We had discussions with Labour Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva, and he asked for two weeks but two weeks have passed now. Because of the coronavirus situation, we are waiting for the Government to call on us for another meeting. Our stance is that the Government and the President can order the RPCs to increase to Rs. 1,000 and then in turn, provide some sort of benefit to the companies, such as a tax cut. It’ll be good if the Government can assist the companies. But the Government can order the RPCs to make this increment. In fact, these companies are paying outside daily workers Rs. 1,000.”

Lamenting the disregard of repeated requests of the Government to make the increment, Suresh said that while they had the option to resort to trade union action to compel the change, they would not resort to such actions given the current situation in the country.

“Repeatedly, they have promised to make this increment. The Prime Minister also told Parliament that they would make it Rs. 1,000. We are reminding, requesting, and pressuring the Government to

do so. We have the option to initiate trade union action. But it is not a time to do these things. The economy is weak. As a responsible trade union, we think that this is not the time to resort to such measures. We must serve the country and serve the people. As a country, we must co-operate.”

The Minister of Labour, speaking to *The Sunday Morning* on an earlier occasion, said that he had instructed the RPCs to implement the wage hike within a period of two weeks.

“I have given them two weeks to make the increment. I shall decide on a course of action if they failed to do so. I will not reveal what steps I will take in such a situation, as it would forewarn the companies,” Minister Nimal Siripala De Silva told *The Sunday Morning*.

Planters’ Association of Ceylon Chairman Bathiya Bulumulla said that plantation companies could not violate the Collective Agreement.

“We are in a Collective Agreement. If we are to adhere to the Government’s request, then we will have to abrogate the Collective Agreement and get into some other system. Right now, we are within the Collective Agreement with the unions. So, we can decide on a new wage model only during the next negotiations in January. The Government has merely made a request but we are in a Collective Agreement. So, we cannot violate the agreement by heeding to the Government’s request.”

He said the regional companies would have to deliberate with the unions at the next round of negotiations for the Collective Agreement in January.

“We have to bargain with the unions and come to an agreement. We have already submitted several proposals where some have not been agreed to by the unions. We have to sit with the unions and discuss this. The new wage model will give more than Rs. 1,000 for a worker. It should be a win-win for both parties. It will be a productivity-based model.”

In addition, he said the RPCs had taken steps to look after the estate workers during the lockdown period.

“We are not charitable organisations. People who are working with the company, we will look after them. People who are working outside the estates, those institutions should look after them. We are the only industry which continued to work during the Covid lockdown. We were providing them with whatever facilities were required for the workers throughout estate co-operative societies. We have not kept anyone hungry. The RPCs have looked after the people.”

However, the Institute of Social Development claimed otherwise, charging that estate workers are suffering, even now, without proper infrastructure and finances.

Institute of Social Development Executive Director Muthulingam Periyasamy asserted that the living conditions were extremely poor and that the pandemic had only made matters worse as home quarantine was not humanly possible for the estate workers.

“With regard to their living conditions, especially under the Covid-19 regulations, it is a very dire state. We must understand that a majority of the estate workers still live in line-rooms without any toilet or water facilities. So now, when these people are being asked to self-quarantine at home, how are they to survive without water and proper sanitation facilities? They have to go outside to find water or to use the toilet. They don’t have any kind of savings or wealth and they don’t even have a reserve fund, so there is no proper way to care for the sons and daughters who returned to the estates.”

He said the plantation companies also failed to provide adequate support for the estate workers.

“The estate management also does not do anything and continues griping that they don’t make any profits. The companies are gaining, the Government is gaining, but the estate workers are losing. What they gain from foreign income is not reaching the poor estate workers who do all the work. Some companies, to be on the safe side, provided loans to the estate workers on the condition that it will be deducted from their salaries. So, what is the companies’ contribution? What has been spent additionally under these extreme circumstances?”

He charged that only a handful of estate worker families received the Rs. 5,000 allowance given by the Government.

“During the initial Covid-19 lockdown, the President allowed the agriculture workers and the plantation workers to work. This was for two reasons – one was to sort out the food shortage crisis and the second reason was to gain foreign exchange; especially tea prices went up. So, we, as a non-governmental organisation, provided assistance to the workers and even the companies provided masks and safety gear. But ultimately, the workers didn’t get anything – no special payment or bonus. At the time, the sons and daughters of the plantation community, who work in Colombo, came back to the estates but none of these families received the Rs. 5,000 allowance. Many people in the plantation sector didn’t get it. They would call us and say that they hadn’t received any welfare from the State or the Government.”

He then pointed out that yet another government had failed to address the key issues faced by the estate sector workers.

“Before they came to power, this Government promised to increase the daily wage to Rs. 1,000. Before the presidential election too they promised it. But after that, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, even the alliance party of the Government – the Ceylon Workers’ Congress – is not raising this issue in a prominent way. Very recently, around three weeks ago, the trade unions, i.e. the National Estate Workers’ Union and the Ceylon Workers’ Congress, had a dialogue with the Government where the Government promised to make this increment but after that, nothing happened.”

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