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Committed to Human Rights and Community
Development

PRESS RELEASE

Economic marginalisation of Plantation Tamils

The Tamil Information Centre expresses its solidarity with the Hill country plantation workers in their struggle for increase in wages. Throughout the history of the plantations in Sri Lanka, the estate population has been

subjected to severe hardship and exploitation, not only through suppression of wages below subsistence levels, but also through discrimination in the provision of shelter, education health facilities and nutrition.

Sri Lanka's independence has not conferred a share in the growing national wealth on the Tamil workers, nor as formal sovereignty brought them full political participation. Successive Sri Lankan governments have been hand-in-glove with plantation interests in exploiting plantation labour in various ways. Legislation has suppressed wages and crucial social facilities and has forced repatriation on workers under agreements without their participation.

In April 1996, rivals, the Ceylon workers Congress (CWC) and the Joint plantation Trade Union Council (JPTUC) joined hands in trade union action demanding Rs. 8.00 wage increase per day and 300 days work in a year. After a week's strike trade unions accepted an increase up to Rs. 83.00 per day on the assurance of wage increase with increase in profits. But wages have remained at Rs. 83.00 per day. Later the CWC and the UNP affiliated Lankan Jathika Estate Workers Union (LJEWU) entered into a no-strike pact with the Employers Federation. The pact expired in December 1997. Talks between the Employers Federation representing the 23 plantation companies and a joint delegation comprising the CWC, LJEWU and the JPTUC on 23 January on the demand for wage increase broke down without agreement. The Federation stuck to its offer of RS 93.00 per day while unions have demanded Rs. 105.00.

Sri Lankan became the largest exporter of tea once again in 1997 exporting 250 million Kg., a 4,5% increase as compared to 1996. Prices have remained high and companies have made profit. The companies have also been let free in some of the workers' welfare measures. A plantation Welfare Cooperation Fund has been inaugurated and the Ministry for Plantation Housing has been provided Rs. 60 million (US \$ 1 million) by the government. Another Rs.15 million has been provided to the Animal Husbandry Ministry for plantation Housing.

The trade unions say since the private companies took over estates in 1993, over 200,000 jobs have been lost in the industry. Welfare facilities such as health and education have remained marginal for many decades and

governments have made poor attempts to improve life on the plantations. The workers have been crushed by rise in cost of living and have increasingly become desperate.

The plantation Tamil have over the years, apart from struggle to keep life and limb together, have also suffered the consequences of denial of citizenship, franchise and have faced periodic violence. Despite government

claims that the citizenship problem has been solved, majority of them remains second-class citizens under legal provisions relating to citizenship by registration.

The TIC calls for sufficient wages for the plantation workers whose hard toil sustains the economy and provide facilities for improvements in representation and welfare.

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