

Unions on Plantations: Do Basic Needs Matter?

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Introduction

Why have plantation unions in Sri Lanka generally proved unable or unwilling to identify and act upon the housing, health and education needs of their members? Does this matter? And if so, why? In this article I take up these important questions and seek to provide answers in the light of my own research into the Sri Lankan tea industry where there has been a long-established and increasingly powerful labour movement since the late 1920s.¹

In the first half of the article, I give a brief historical overview of how unions developed in the Sri Lankan tea industry before looking in more detail at the 'estate regime' with which they had to contend. I then offer an assessment of their strengths and weaknesses, one of the striking omissions in union policy and strategy being the low priority given to housing, health and education.

In the second half of the article, I go on to explore the significance of this omission by reference to the notion of *counter-hegemony*. Unions are not just political organisations concerned with 'orthodox' trade union activities and specific political issues. Potentially, they fulfil a much broader 'educational' role in developing the general social and political awareness of their members; and as such, they can, and indeed should, function as *counter-hegemony*.²

Unless the plantation unions challenge the existing assumptions and attitudes of the prevailing *dominant hegemony*, which are most clearly expressed in the world-view of management but find echoes in those of many government officials, aid donors and development experts, they will find it hard to change the terms of debate and action in which they relate to management. Yet, as matters stand on plantations today, most 'development' has to be mediated through the management hierarchy.

In the case of the Sri Lankan plantation unions, it can be argued that their reluctance to focus on basic needs

such as housing, health and education represents more than an over-riding preoccupation with wages, citizenship, repatriation and now communal violence. It also reflects a fundamental weakness at the heart of the union movement with serious implications for the future. Until the unions themselves recognise, without fear of the consequences for their current leadership, the importance of encouraging a more independent and confident outlook among their members, plantation workers will unfortunately tend to remain not only inadequately paid, poorly fed, under-educated, badly housed and denied access to appropriate medical facilities, but unwitting collaborators in their own exploitation.

Historical Overview

Unions in Sri Lanka have a relatively long history, and the first independent union activity among Indian Tamil plantation workers began in the late 1920s. In 1925, a South Indian Brahmin nationalist and journalist, K. Natesa Aiyar, took up their cause, and in 1931, he established the All-Ceylon Indian Estate Labourers Federation (later the Ceylon Indian Workers Federation) in Hatton in the heart of the plantation districts. However, within two years, under the impact of the world depression, internal dissension and concerted planter opposition, his efforts had more or less collapsed.

Nevertheless, although he was unable to organise on the estates themselves since they were the private property of the companies, Natesa Aiyar took steps to redress individual grievances through petitions, held mass meetings in the towns and published a steady stream of propaganda criticising the estate regime. Also, as member of the State Council, he proved a vigorous champion of the estate workers. Within a short time, he had become the saviour of the Indian Tamil workforce and the *bête noire* of planters.

The next stage of union activity was introduced by a wave of 'spontaneous' strikes in the tea districts in 1939/40. 'Symbolic' leadership was offered by the Ceylonese Left who had been active in the estate areas for a few years. Linking protest on the estates to the struggle against imperialism, they argued that the estate workers constituted 'the vanguard of the revolutionary proletariat'. However in 1942, one of the two main left-wing parties was banned for

¹ The research took the form of a two year project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, reference number G00230114, in which time I was a Research Fellow at the University of Sussex.

² See William 1983:144-6 for discussion of the different meanings of *hegemony*. My use of *hegemony* and *counter-hegemony* derives from Gramsci.

subversive activity against the state and, as part of the Defence Regulations brought in during the Second World War, strikes in the tea and rubber industries were prohibited under the Essential Services (Strikes and Lockouts) Order.

But in 1935, an Ordinance calling for the compulsory registration of trade unions had in effect legalised their existence and in 1940 the 'Seven-Point Agreement' signed by the Planters Association and some of the estate unions established their competence to represent workers' demands. It also provided a recognised procedure for negotiations between management and labour.

Meanwhile what was to become the single largest estate union, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), had been set up in 1941 as the Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union; and after the war was over and Independence granted in 1948, the CWC emerged as the strongest political organisation working on behalf of estate workers. In contrast, the Ceylonese Left substantially disengaged itself from estate union activity after the disenfranchisement of the Indian Tamil plantation workers under the 1948/49 Citizenship Acts. Henceforward, their main concerns were the largely Sinhalese labour movement based in Colombo; and the Sinhalese rural areas.

In the decade after Independence, the CWC remained hostile to the Government because of disenfranchisement. However, their links with the more militant, anti-government Sinhalese labour movement were strained and, in 1956, there was a split within the CWC when the more radical wing of the union broke away to form the Democratic Workers Congress (DWC). Thereafter, the CWC became a more 'communally' based organisation. The support of the workforce was sought more on the basis of their identity as Indian Tamils than as exploited workers.

In the 1960s, the leadership adopted a more openly opportunistic policy of cooperation with estate management and the more conservative of the two leading Sinhalese political parties, the United National Party (UNP), which has constituted the present government of Sri Lanka since 1977. In that year, the current president of the CWC, Thondaman, joined the government as Minister of Rural Industries Development, arguing that it was in the interests of the CWC not 'to wage struggles to find solutions to our common problems but . . . to ask for and obtain our rights at cabinet level' [quoted in Kurian 1984:89].

Since Independence there have been four main estate unions:

1. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) led by Thondaman and originating in the Ceylon Indian Congress inaugurated in 1939.
2. The Democratic Workers Congress (DWC) led by Aziz which split from the CWC in 1956 due to

personal and political differences between Aziz and Thondaman.

3. The Lanka Estate Workers Union (LEWU) affiliated to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP).
4. The Ceylon Plantation Workers Union (CPWU) affiliated to the Communist Party (CP).

The first two have always been primarily Indian Tamil in leadership and membership; the second two are first and foremost Sinhalese left-wing parties who took an active interest in Tamil estate workers. It should be added, though, that since 1977, the UNP-affiliated Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union has also become active, but more among the Sinhalese workers recruited to the estate over the last ten years. Of these five unions, the CWC is the largest and best organised and it is generally reckoned to speak on behalf of the Estate Tamils. In other words, since the 1920s, the estate workers have been organised in unions either attached to political parties (as in the LSSP, CP and now UNP unions) or with their own political wing (as in the CWC and DWC).

The 'Estate Regime'

The unions had to fight for their right to exist but, once established, became themselves an essential part of the estate regime. In this section, I look briefly at the main problems they had to confront if they were to develop successfully.

Planter Opposition

The early unions had to deal with the concerted, and at times violent, opposition of planters, who before Independence were an immensely powerful group of people. The first attempts at organising unions were dismissed by planters as the work of 'political agitators' bent on stirring up trouble for their own nefarious 'political' purposes. For a number of years, many planters (often under instructions from their companies) refused to recognise or negotiate with the newly formed unions whom they resisted through a variety of legal and underhand tactics — for example, invoking the laws of trespass to keep union organisers off the estates and to prevent union meetings; the dismissal and intimidation of 'trouble-makers'; cooperation with the police; fermenting union rivalry (sometimes by playing on caste differences); encouraging head *kanganies* and staff to 'talk' to the workers; and the distribution of their own propaganda and weekly Tamil newspaper, *The Oolian*.

Forms of Social Control

More profoundly, unions had to take on an authoritarian, hierarchial and highly coercive system of social control. Over the years at least three sophisticated and subtle forms of social control had

emerged. The first was the evolution of increasingly 'modern' supervisory structures and methods for dealing with organisational problems on the estate in the field, factory and office. Responsibility for the performance of stated tasks was carefully delineated and delegated and backed by a zealously guarded process of decision-making and accountability. This in turn rested on an elaborate book-keeping system based on the check rolls or labour register/pay rolls recording the names of all workers and their respective work output.

The second involved the incorporation into the estate regime of 'traditional' Tamil social organisation, values and culture largely through the *kanganay* system of labour recruitment and planters' labour policy. The *kanganies* were labour recruiters from South India who settled on the estate alongside 'their' workers and assumed wide and far-reaching responsibilities for their welfare and work performance. Sharing the same culture, they, rather than the planters, exercised direct control over the estate workforce through their intimate knowledge of the daily circumstances of their lives.

The head *kanganies* took the lead in temple matters, lent money to cover the costs of weddings, funerals and other family ceremonies, settled 'line disputes' and 'brought with [them] the *poosaries* or priests, the soothsayers and singers of ballads, the teachers and readers of the classics, the medicine men and the 'experts' who decided what was or was not to be done on particular occasions' [Gnanamuttu 1976:6]. Their powers were anchored round their original functions as labour recruiter and creditor; and endorsed by their position in the estate hierarchy, where they could usually count on the backing of management. In addition to their hold over 'their' workers through debt relationships, they exercised *de facto* rights of punishment and dismissal and, in early days, were paid the wages due 'their' workers.

Planters seldom if ever understood the full complexity of the social organisation and values of their workers. Yet they realised the significance of maintaining ties of family, gender, caste and kinship, and of religion in creating a settled, essentially passive and hard-working labour force. Hence it was common practice before the Second World War to rely heavily on head *kanganies* and to maintain good 'coast connections' or links with the villages in South India from where the workforce came.

The third form of social control was the development of authoritarian, paternalistic and at times 'quasi-feudal' management styles and idioms which presented the relationship between planters and their workforce as more than just a 'work relationship' but one involving beneficent paternalism on one side and company/family loyalty and respect for property on the other. As Forrest puts it in his official history of the

tea industry:

the traditional relationship . . . [was supposedly one of] . . . gruff paternalism, deepening often into respect and even affection on both sides; the planter with perhaps 2,000 souls living a completely self-contained life on his estate had to act towards them in the mixed capacity of commanding officer, labour manager, business adviser and Dutch Uncle. His womenfolk naturally became involved too [Forrest 1967:112].

Dependence

The explicit aims of management were to create and sustain a 'settled', cheap labour force for the industry. Implicitly, this meant keeping the plantation workers isolated and fragmented on the estates, illiterate and often in debt, but dependent on the estate regime for their well-being and livelihood and 'free' from outside influence and interference.

This dependence was engineered and maintained in different ways. Some were openly coercive: for example, trespass laws and restrictions on mobility; long working hours; summary dismissal and eviction; strict surveillance and discipline; and corporal punishment and verbal abuse. Others were rooted in the harsh working and living conditions endured by estate workers: for example, low and often irregular wages; debt; poor housing; inadequate provision for health and education; non-ownership of land or minimal property (in India and Sri Lanka); and the lack of alternative occupational skills, experience and opportunities.

On both accounts, dependence was internalised to some degree in the outlook of the workforce and gave rise to an accompanying psychological demoralisation and passivity towards forces seemingly beyond their control. Hemmed in by limited social and cultural horizons, free in name alone and otherwise encumbered by a whole range of restrictions on their freedom to think and act on their own behalf, Indian Tamil estate workers were enmeshed in paternalistic and quasi-feudal forms of thought and behaviour. These were drawn from and, in turn, reinforced their habitual tendency towards deference and respect for those in authority.

Crucially, before unionisation of the workforce, the estate regime could command a surprising degree of acceptance, even loyalty, from those who stood to gain the least from it. And apart from 'bolting' or fleeing an estate, acts of violence against individual supervisors or staff and various forms of avoiding work, the only way for plantation workers to alleviate their suffering was to take refuge in religion.³

³ It must be said that many of the worst abuses of the estate regime in the Sri Lankan tea industry were partially removed by legislation in the 1920s and 1930s and as a result of changing attitudes and expectations in part brought about by the emergence of the unions.

Assessment: Strengths and Weaknesses

From the start, plantation unions were successful in tapping a deep undercurrent of suffering and silent opposition on the part of plantation workers. Since then, they have built up a solid core of union support among estate workers which has been demonstrated, for example, in May Day Rallies and the 1984 strike over higher wages. The Ceylon Workers Congress, in particular, has developed the organisational capacity to take on management and government and it now has an extensive organisational machinery operating at national, regional and district levels and on individual estates.

As a result, the estate unions have secured improvements in wages and basic working and living conditions. They have also intervened effectively in the wider political arena, especially with government, on issues of citizenship and repatriation. And up to a point, despite the opposition of planters, the suspicious attitude of government and the indifference or hostility of many Sri Lankan politicians, they have succeeded in breaking down some of the real and imagined dependence of the estate workforce on the estate regime which, prior to unionisation, effectively neutralised the Tamil estate workers as a political force.

Yet, there are continuing weaknesses in the union movement on the estates. First, persisting rivalry between unions and competition over membership means that no one union can command the undivided allegiance of the Indian Tamil workforce. CWC union officials accept the fluidity in union membership but play down its significance claiming, for instance, that when necessary they can call out non-CWC members on strike.

Second, limited educational activities and programmes are insufficient to develop political awareness and combat the alleged lack of discipline among some of the union rank and file. The CWC, for example, has a Workers Educational Programme which receives substantial international support from organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Federation of Plantation, Agricultural and Allied Workers (IFPAAW). However, it is mainly concerned with 'orthodox' union matters to do with learning how the organisation works, procedures, wages and conditions of work. There are few union-organised programmes for adult literacy, welfare or health.

Third, women are still excluded from union activity and leadership at all levels. This is partly due to the simple fact that they have two jobs, one in the field and one in the home, and therefore little time to devote to the unions. However, their participation is also inhibited by prevailing attitudes towards the position of women in society more generally.

Fourth, there are still few opportunities for rank and file members to rise through the union hierarchy. At the outset, leadership was necessarily assumed by 'outsiders' who were English-speaking, familiar with the workings of government and politics, and capable of understanding labour legislation and the procedures for handling labour disputes. In contrast, workers were bound by their limited social and cultural horizons and by their inexperience of political action. They were also at the mercy of management's power to move against potential 'trouble-makers' (if need be by summary dismissal and eviction).

However, even after the Second World War, positions of prominence within the CWC were taken by head *kanganies* and their sons who, realising the head *kangany* system was under attack from above and below, threw in their lot with the workforce. Many plantation workers continue to feel that they are culturally and socially inferior to those in positions of authority over them. They remain deferential in attitude and accept paternalistic behaviour on the part of the union leadership.

Fifth, the CWC has become increasingly reformist in policy, opportunist in strategy and 'communal' in its appeal to the workforce. Over the same period, the more militant and radical unions like the DWC, LEWU and CPWU have lost much of their support and effectiveness, thereby reinforcing the isolation of most Indian Tamil estate workers from the Left and the wider labour movement.

The CWC leadership has been particularly concerned with safeguarding the political status of the Indian Tamils. Consequently, they have given top priority to citizenship and repatriation and, as they themselves recognise, this has unfortunately circumscribed their efforts to improve wages and working conditions and, more noticeably, housing, health and education.

Opponents, though, criticise the CWC for seeking concessions on citizenship and repatriation at the expense of more concerted agitation and protest against low wages and poor working and living conditions. They argue, among other things, that it is not merely a question of scarce clerical and administrative resources. Rather, the CWC leadership fears the consequences of educating and raising the political consciousness of its membership.

Unions and Counter-hegemony

My purpose so far has been threefold: first, to describe how unions developed in the Sri Lankan tea industry; second, to discuss briefly key features of the 'estate regime' with which unions had to contend; and third, to offer an assessment of their achievements and limitations. One notable weakness on the part of the unions to date has been the low priority given to improving housing, health and education.

Does this matter? I believe it does if unions are to remain an important force in the future for introducing desirable change in the lives of plantation workers. In this section, I explore the significance of this weakness in terms of the concept of *counter-hegemony*. However, to make sense of the notion of unions functioning as *counter-hegemony*, it is necessary to clarify the different roles fulfilled by unions and the relationship between the concepts of *hegemony* and *counter-hegemony*.

Union Roles

Unions fulfil more than one possible, general function. In a strict sense, they may constitute political organisations concerned on the one hand with 'orthodox' trade union activity and on the other with specific political issues. For example, the Sri Lankan plantation unions have for many years campaigned with varying success for higher wages and the redress of workers' grievances such as unfair dismissals and evictions. They have also been involved in attempts to safeguard the rights of Indian Tamils over repatriation and citizenship.

As trade unions, they have made use of the existing structure of Wages Boards and Industrial Tribunals and the procedures for negotiation between labour and management which date from the Second World War and earlier. As political parties, they have engaged with other Sri Lankan political parties and organisations, both in opposition to and alliance with the government of the day. Industrial action *per se*, particularly strikes, has often been overtly political in aim.

More broadly, however, unions should be 'educational' in so far as they become a vehicle for extending the social and political awareness of their members; and for developing their confidence and ability to think and act on their own behalf. 'Knowledge' is no less a source of power than the capacity to down tools and go on strike. In fact it carries far deeper, long-term implications. To empower plantation workers with knowledge as to how they can shape more actively their own lives is to show them the possibility of one day controlling 'the system' which still controls them. It is this less 'orthodox' role of the unions which raises the question of *counter-hegemony*.

Hegemony and Counter-hegemony

The concept of *counter-hegemony* presupposes the existence of a dominant *hegemony*. This in turn refers to how dominant groups come to dominate subordinate groups in a number of ways whose cumulative effect is to make more openly coercive forms of domination less necessary. By 'universalising' their own interests in such a way that they become to some extent the perceived interests of other groups, hegemonic classes or groups can begin to rely as much

on consent to their 'rule' as coercion. In other words, power and control no longer need to be expressed directly in terms of force.

However, it should be noted that the element of consent does not eliminate the existence of coercion; rather it alters the form taken by coercion and the circumstances when it is exercised. They are not so much alternatives or polar opposites as interdependent aspects of the same process of domination.

So what is *counter-hegemony*? The short answer is *the view from below*: that complex, often confused and confusing, set of values, attitudes, interpretations and expectations through which people understand their experience of life. *Counter-hegemony* is by definition usually at odds with the world-view constructed by the *dominant hegemony*, however powerless it may be to change it. It may, though, duplicate key aspects of the *dominant hegemony* and it should be noted that the existence of one, more influential *counter-hegemony* does not rule out the existence of others.

The Significance of Counter-hegemony for Plantation Unions

With regard to unions on plantations, the significance of *counter-hegemony* lies above all in its potential to articulate the interests of organised labour and challenge the existing assumptions and values of the prevailing management ideology or ethos, in other words, the *dominant hegemony*. As such, it makes possible two further developments. The first is a shift in the terms of debate and action through which unions (and their members) relate to management. The second is a change in the power relations characteristic of estates and the industry as a whole — that is, who takes decisions, sets priorities, identifies 'needs', allocates funding and controls the redistribution of profits.

In Sri Lanka, the plantation unions have become increasingly powerful at all levels within the tea industry and in society at large. But their contribution remains largely defensive. The CWC is capable of bringing the industry to a halt in support of higher wage demands (as in the 1984 strike when an estimated 500,000 workers struck for nine days); or wringing important political concessions from the government (as in the 1986 Citizenship Act affecting the remaining 'stateless' Indian Tamil plantation workers).

But where are the well thought-out policies on health and education? The schemes for profit-sharing or linking wages to the world price of tea (as in India)? The strategies for fighting prejudice against women and improving all-round welfare? Or the realistic demands for more active involvement of plantation workers in the management of estates, and of the unions in the running of the industry?

These gaps in union policy and strategy matter for two reasons. On the one hand, the 'closed' nature of the estate regime has serious implications for conventional development approaches. Plantation workers live within their place of work but their houses and gardens, their dispensaries and hospitals, their 'fields' and their factories are 'owned' and controlled by management. As a result, most 'development' has to be mediated through management or, in the case of education, through government.

On the other hand, over the years, the inequalities and underlying assumptions and values of the estate regime have been internalised and accepted not just by planters and staff but by plantation workers. Their dependence on the estates for their well-being and livelihood may be as much psychological as material or physical, but this makes it no less 'real'. Consequently, it is no longer just a question of management enforcing certain conditions on the workforce (if it ever was) but of the workforce in some ways choosing to stay and participate within 'the system' as it stands and on its terms.

The unions, as an accepted part of 'the system', have potentially a vital role to play in acting as a catalyst and agent for change — both in educating their members to think for themselves and with confidence; and as equal partners with management and government in deciding what has or ought to be done. Accordingly, in the provision of basic needs like housing, health and education, one would ideally expect the unions to take an active role in defining, re-defining and articulating what these are; and then in formulating and implementing appropriate housing, health and education policies and programmes.

Unions, in particular, have the capacity to reflect and act upon the interests of the workforce who provide their membership. And if they do not, who will? Management? Government? The World Bank and the IMF? First and Third World development workers

and academics? If any of these should assume primary responsibility for determining what is best for plantation workers, there is inevitably a real danger of perpetuating in different guise the paternalism of an unfettered plantation regime.

Yet, union leaders and officials can themselves be paternalistic in their attitude towards plantation workers, especially when recruited from social backgrounds different from those of the majority of the workforce. They are, as often as not, divided from each other by education, status, life-style, work experience and, where women workers are concerned, by gender.

Nevertheless, realistic changes on plantations affecting the provision of basic needs like housing, health and education will only come about through a process of *accommodation* involving management, government, unions, aid donors and agencies, and workers. At present, the odd ones out in this configuration are the workers, the have-nots with no real say in how 'the system' is run and to what ends. But, given the existence of strong unions and their potential as *counter-hegemony* to create and sustain new forms of *participation*, there is hope for a more positive contribution on the part of the workforce.

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