

Australian workers demand end to persecution of Sri Lankan plantation workers

Our reporters
5 September 2023

The Sri Lankan Plantation Action Committee (SLPAC) is winning support from workers internationally for its demand that the Attorney General withdraw frame-up court cases against 22 workers and two youths from Alton Estate in Maskeliya, as well as other victimised workers of the Velioya and Katukelle estates in the country's central plantation district.

The SLPAC has received copies of letters sent to the Attorney General by the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee in Sydney, the Australian Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, the Health Workers Rank and File Committee (Australia) and a member of the Australian Pathology Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

Around 500 workers at Alton Estate launched a stoppage on February 2, 2021. They joined the national strike called by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union, on February 5 demanding a 1000-rupee (\$US3) daily wage. The workers continued their strike until March 26, opposing management harassment and provocations.

In a bid to sack the active workers during the strike, management falsely accused 22 of them, together with two youths, of physically assaulting the estate manager and assistant manager and damaging the manager's house during a protest on February 17, 2021. With the backing of the CWC, management made a false complaint to the police and these workers were arrested.

Horana Plantation Company, which controls the Alton estate, summarily sacked 34 workers, including the 22 who had been arrested, without any investigation into the accusations. The police filed cases against the Alton Estate workers in the magistrate's court in Hatton in April 2021. Despite these cases having been dragged out for more than two years, the attorney general still has not formulated charges against workers.

Ten workers at Velioya Estate in Hatton are also being prosecuted for the "crime" of demanding food relief during the COVID-19 lockdown and for demonstrating outside the estate office in June 2021. Management's allegations of damaging the estate tea factory and threatening officers were completely denied by the victimised workers.

In the same year, on September 29, workers at the Katukelle estate protested against management's victimisation of a female worker, P. Ponnirselvi. After an altercation between workers and estate officials, 11 workers were arrested and prosecuted.

The Alton case has been called into the courts on ten occasions. The next hearing is on September 20. Other cases are being similarly prolonged, forcing victimised workers to incur exorbitant transport costs and legal fees while sacrificing their livelihoods.

The SLPAC launched an online and written petition campaign against this victimisation and received more than 800 signatures from workers and university students. The momentum of the international campaign has been intensified with the intervention of the Australian workers.

We urge workers, youth and our readers in Sri Lanka and throughout the world to support this campaign by signing the petition and sending letters to the following authorities, with copies to the Sri Lankan Plantation

Workers Action Committee.

- Sanjay Rajaratnam, Attorney General

No. 159, Hulftsdorp, Colombo 12

Email: administration@attorneygeneral.gov.lk

- P.V. Gunatillake Secretary, Ministry of Public Security

Email: civilsecurity@defence.lk

- C. D. Wickramaratne, Inspector General of Police

Email: telligp@police.lk

Sri Lankan Plantation Workers Action Committee

Email: plantationacsl@gmail.com

Below are letters issued by workers' organisations in Australia:

Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee (Australia)
resolution in defense of persecuted Sri Lankan plantation workers:

The following resolution was passed unanimously by academics, university administrators, university students, and school teachers at a meeting organised by the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee (MURFC) on Sunday, September 9, 2023. The CFPE and MURFC join in the international chorus of workers to demand that the witch-hunt against these plantation workers be ended immediately.

- This meeting called by the Committee for Public Education and the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee condemns the state frame-up of 49 plantation workers at the Alton, Velioya, and Katukelle estates in Sri Lanka, demands all charges against them be dropped immediately, and that all sacked workers be reinstated. They are being persecuted for fighting to improve the wages and working conditions of themselves and their fellow workers under conditions in which the plantation companies are attempting to make workers pay for the crisis in the tea industry. This crisis is a product of the capitalist system, which workers are not responsible for. As university workers, students, and teachers we have decades of experience of being made to pay for a crisis that is not of our making, particularly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

- We endorse the campaign launched by the Sri Lankan Plantation Action Committee (SLPAC) to fight for the defence of these workers. SLPAC is the only organisation that is fighting to defend the rights of plantation workers and indicates the way forward for workers everywhere who wish to fight.

The Australian Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee demands the immediate dropping of all charges against the Alton, Velioya and Katukelle plantation workers.

All these workers are being punished for undertaking legitimate and justified strike action in defence of their jobs, working conditions, wages, and in opposition to the victimisation of their comrades by management.

The fact the police have not provided charge sheets clearly indicates these workers have no case to answer. This is a provocation by the employers who seek retribution against workers who have taken strike action. We reject the false claims of the bosses that workers damaged their property. These are lies used to lay bogus charges against the workers.

This frame-up is part of an international process. Whatever the differences in form and circumstances, the essence is the same: an attempt by the corporate elite and all of its instruments to force workers to pay for the crisis of global capitalism. At Australia Post, that has involved continuous restructuring and ever greater workloads, as governments, with the support of the unions, prepare to privatise it.

As in Sri Lanka, management and the unions are hostile to any attempt by workers to organise independently. The bosses are desperately seeking to increase their profits and make postal workers pay for the decline in letter volume and the slump in the economy.

The same processes are taking place in Sri Lanka. The plantation bosses are attempting to make workers pay for the crisis in the Sri Lankan economy. Plantation workers have responded by fighting back. In return, the bosses are trying to silence them by attacking their democratic right to strike and fight for better living standards.

We consider this an attack on the whole working class, and we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka. We therefore again demand all charges against the Alton, Velioya and Katukelle plantation workers be immediately dropped.

As a member of the **Australian Pathology Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee**, I wholeheartedly support the petition campaign launched by the Sri Lankan Plantation Action Committee demanding that the Attorney General end frame-up court proceedings against 22 employees and two teenagers from Alton Estate in Maskeliya.

The Pathology Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee was founded to advocate for safe working conditions in our workplace and the workplaces of other pathology workers around Australia. We are organising independently of the Health Workers Union (HWU). The HWU is aware of the hazardous working conditions in our workplaces, but has done nothing to address them.

The legal proceedings appear to be a witch-hunt against workers who only want the best for their families and themselves. At the moment, charge sheets have not been provided and charges have not been made, depriving workers of the right to prompt legal procedures.

These persecutions are clearly part of an attempt to shift the burden of the general economic crisis onto the shoulders of workers through inflation, wage cuts, reduced social benefits, and increased workloads to increase productivity and company profits.

The primary plantation union, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), gave the police the names of the protesting employees, who were later arrested and released on stringent bail conditions. The Horana Plantation Company, which owns the Alton Estate, fired 34 employees on the same fraudulent accusations without any investigation having been conducted.

I urge workers and students around the world to sign the petition and send letters and emails to the attorney general. It is part of a larger effort to protect democratic rights.

Sincerely,
Suphor Samurtharb

Australian Pathology Workers Rank-and-File Safety Committee

Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia):

Dear Sir,

I am writing on behalf of the Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia) to express our support for the campaign launched by the Sri Lankan Plantation Action Committee (SLPAC) to demand the immediate withdrawal of all frame-up cases against the 22 Alton Estate tea plantation workers. We also demand the immediate reinstatement of all 28 workers who were sacked at the Alton Estate.

In a violation of workers' basic democratic right to organise, the Alton Estate workers are being persecuted for fighting for decent wages and better working conditions.

For more than two-and-a-half years, the police and courts have left false allegations hanging over workers' heads, even though no formal charges have been formulated or presented in court! These actions are an attempt to terrorise and intimidate workers and must be opposed. The frame-up constitutes an attack not just on the estate employees, but on the rights of the working class more broadly.

The use of repressive laws and violence by governments and companies to attack workers fighting for a living wage is occurring globally. These anti-democratic assaults are being aided and abetted by the trade unions.

The plantation unions in Sri Lanka have rejected any fight to defend the Alton Estate workers. Likewise, the unions in Australia collaborate with employers to attack workers' jobs, wages and working conditions. The nurses' union in Western Australia was fined \$350,000 for holding a one-day strike late last year in protest over the state government's below-inflation wage offer. Opposed to mobilising nurses to fight this attack, the union simply paid the fine.

The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee stands alongside the Alton Estate workers. An injury to one is an injury to all!

We demand the immediate withdrawal of all frame-up cases against the 22 Alton Estate tea plantation workers and for the immediate reinstatement of all 28 sacked workers. We pledge to do all we can to alert Australian health workers to this anti-democratic attack and urge them to support the SLPAC campaign.

Sincerely,
Julia Thomas

Convenor, Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee (Australia)



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact