

Four-year witch-hunt continues against Alton Estate workers in Sri Lanka

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The witch-hunt against Alton estate workers in Maskeliya, in Sri Lanka's central plantation district, has entered its fourth year with court action against 22 workers and two youth dragging on endlessly. A previously scheduled court hearing, due on March 3, has been postponed to June 5.

Estate management has refused to reinstate 38 workers, including the 22 named in the court case, who were summarily sacked on March 22, 2021.

The 22 workers have been falsely accused of physically assaulting estate manager Sathyamoorthy Subash Narayanan and assistant manager Anushan Thiruchelvam and damaging the manager's residence on February 15, 2021. Narayanan and the police claim the attacks occurred during protests by workers that day against ongoing management repression. Alton Estate workers have categorically denied these allegations.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Plantation Workers Action Committee immediately launched a campaign demanding the unconditional reinstatement of the sacked workers and withdrawal of the frame-up charges. The campaign has won widespread support in Sri Lanka and internationally with scores of petition and letters sent to Sri Lankan state authorities.

Determined to maintain their repression of the targeted Alton workers, state authorities and the Horana Plantation Company (HPC), which manages the estate has ignored these appeals. HPC, which failed to conduct any formal investigation into the alleged charges, has denied workers' right to appeal for their innocence. The Sri Lankan attorney general, moreover, has not presented any charges against the targeted workers and youth.

These factors make clear that the entire case is fabricated and part of a joint conspiracy by HPC, police and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the union that covers these workers. In fact, at the time, local CWC leaders even ordered some workers to surrender to the police.

The anti-democratic attack occurred during a nationwide campaign by plantation workers for a 1,000-rupee daily wage (equivalent to \$US5 at the time).

On February 2, 2021, about 500 Alton Estate workers walked out over this demand and three days later, on February 5, joined national strike action called by the CWC involving hundreds of

thousands of Sri Lankan estate workers over the same issue. The Alton Estate workers remained on strike until March 26 to protest ongoing management harassment and provocations.

While the CWC directly collaborated with the HPC and police in this witch hunt, all the other estate unions, including the National Workers Union, Democratic Workers Congress (DWC), Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, Upcountry People's Front and the All Ceylon Estate Workers Union have kept their mouths shut, refusing to defend the victimised workers.

These unions are aligned with the parliamentary opposition parties. The first four with Samagi Jana Balawegaya, and the other controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna. Not one of the numerous unions in Sri Lanka has lifted a finger to oppose the frameup and victimisation of the Alton Estate workers.

R. Kavithamany, one of the victimised workers, told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the difficult situation now facing her family.

"We have suffered a lot during past three years. We have found work as temporary employees in estates three kilometres away, which means we must leave home at seven in the morning and don't return until five or six in the evening.

"This situation makes it very difficult for us to look after our children or manage our day to day expenses on the small income we earn. I have three children and two sons are now unable to continue their study because of our financial problems," she said.

"All the trade unions betrayed us," she continued and pointed out that a pending case for reinstatement at the Hatton Labour Tribunal was dragging on. "Every time we attend these cases each worker has to spend about 4,000 rupees on travelling and lawyer fees," she added.

Ganeshan, another worker, said, "While we've been sacked, management is hiring temporary workers from other estates but they have no pension benefits. The trade unions are on the management's side not ours."

Estate workers in the three years prior to the 2021 national strike were involved in continuous protests and strikes to demand a 1,000-rupee daily wage. Confronted with this rising militancy, the repression unleashed against Alton Estate workers by HPC was a calculated attempt, on behalf of the

regional plantation companies (RPCs), to intimidate all estate workers.

The RPCs and the Ceylon Federation of Employers opposed the 1,000-rupee wage demand, insisting on the imposition of a revenue share model (RSM). Under this scheme, workers are allocated plots of land with 1,000 or more tea bushes with estate companies supplying inputs such as fertiliser and agrochemicals.

Workers, and their families, who are responsible for maintaining and harvesting tea bushes, receive a payment, after estate management deducts the cost of its “inputs” and then takes its share.

The union bureaucracy has openly sided with the companies to try and impose this highly exploitative system.

Along with their involvement in the repression of Alton workers, the plantation trade union leaderships have collaborated with estate management to prevent estate workers fighting back against ongoing wage cuts, increasing workloads, deteriorating social conditions and attacks on democratic rights increased.

Soon after the Alton Estate witch hunt, five workers at Velioya Estate in Hatton were arrested in June 2021 for protesting to demand the government allocate food relief during a COVID-19 lockdown.

On September 29, 2021, police arrested 11 workers at the Katukelle Estate at Talawakelle. They went on a strike against the victimisation of P. Ponnirselvi, a female worker, by estate management.

While workers spontaneously organised protests against both these attacks, these actions were called off by the unions.

According to official statistics, the real wages of private sector employees in Sri Lanka, including estate workers, had declined to 82 points by mid-2023—taking 2013 as the base year of 100 points.

A Census and Statistics of Department report for 2023 has also revealed that household income of plantation sector population decreased by 62.9 percent but their expenditure has risen by 90.3 percent as a result of Sri Lanka’s economic crisis starting in March 2022.

In April 2021, former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse gazetted an inadequate 1,000-rupee daily wage for plantation employees to try and dissipate workers’ rising anger. The RPCs only accepted this increase following a judicial ruling but then used various methods, including impossible higher daily targets for tea plucking and latex collecting, to slash costs. If the targets were not achieved, the 1,000-rupee daily wage could be cut to around 750 rupees or less.

Under International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity measures now being imposed by the Wickremesinghe government, 21 RPCs will be restructured, along with hundreds of state-owned enterprises.

This will include the dismantling of some estates, transforming them into tourist locations, and the diversification

of cultivation, with only “profitable” tea and rubber estates maintained. These “reforms” will heavily impact on the current one million-strong estate population and its 115,000 active workers, resulting in job destruction, wage cuts and even harsher working conditions.

The Wickremesinghe government, which has its own version of the RSM, is proposing that estate workers be transformed into small land holders falsely claiming incomes will improve as a result.

Last November, President Wickremesinghe addressed a NAAM 200 event—the 200th anniversary of arrival of India-origin Tamil workers to Sri Lanka—in Colombo.

“Regional plantation companies will be asked to outsource tea plucking to workers, which will eliminate the existing plantation system, transforming them into tea smallholders with ownership of the land,” he declared.

DWC leader Mono Ganesan prefigured this proposal early that year, declaring during a discussion on June 23, “The government is talking about restructuring RPCs, which is good. We agree on principle, but with restructuring, plantation workers should also be considered as part of the system and made working partners in such systems as smallholders.”

In other words, the estate unions will do their utmost in collaborating with the government and the plantation bosses to impose these brutal cost-cutting measures.

To fight these attacks, workers need to form their own organisations—i.e., workers action committees, independent of the trade unions, capitalist parties and their hangers on—to unify with their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka and internationally.

In this struggle, estate workers and other sections of the Sri Lankan working class must demand the immediate reinstatement of Alton and other victimised workers and the withdrawal of all judicial cases.

Workers can only defend their democratic rights as part of a unified political struggle of the working class to overthrow the profit system and establish a workers’ and peasants’ government that nationalises the major industries, banks and the estates, placing them under the democratic control of the working class.



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