

Victimisation of Alton estate workers in Sri Lanka continues

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Two court cases related to several dozen Alton estate workers went to hearing in December and January at the Magistrate Court and Labour Tribunal respectively. The proceedings in both cases demonstrated the determination of Horna Plantation Company, which controls the Alton estate, and the state authorities to punish the falsely-accused employees.

At the hearing on December 15 against 22 workers of the Alton estate in Maskeliya, the Hatton Magistrate postponed the case to March 5. It has now dragged out for four years beginning in March 2021.

These workers have been accused of physically assaulting estate manager Sathyamoorthy Subash Narayanan and assistant manager Anushan Thiruchelvam and also damaging the manager's residence during a protest on February 15, 2021.

Workers insist they were framed up by the company and the police in order to suppress their campaign for higher daily wages. They began strike action on February 2 that year and joined a national strike by hundreds of thousands of estate workers three days later demanding an increase in their daily wage to 1,000 rupees (\$US5 at 2021 exchange rates). However, they continued the strike until March 29 because of harassment of management.

During the last four years, the magistrate granted the request by police to postpone the case, claiming that they were awaiting the Sri Lanka's Attorney General's advice to charge workers for damaging the estate manager's residence.

On December 15, a Maskeliya police officer told the courts that the Attorney General (AG) had decided there was insufficient evidence to indict the workers for damaging the manager's residence.

The AG's conclusion effectively demolished the main accusation by the company and police that the workers had damaged estate property and exposed the false nature of the whole case. However, the magistrate again

postponed, this time allowing the police time to frame new charges against the employees.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Alton Workers' Action Committee (AWAC) insisted from the beginning that the case involved a joint conspiracy of the plantation company and police with the collaboration of the trade union bureaucrats of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC). CWC officials at the estate advised the workers to surrender to the police.

On the basis of the same false claims, Horana Plantations sacked 38 workers, including the 22 who were charged. These repressive measure were aimed at intimidating not only Alton workers but the plantation workforce as a whole that was engaged in strikes and protests for higher wages and against intolerable conditions.

Judgement of the Labour Tribunal (LT) case of 13 sacked workers who were demanding reinstatement was delivered on January 9. These employees filed their appeal through the CWC, while 17 retained a private lawyer. The cases have been dragging on for the past three years.

For the 13 workers, the LT judge dismissed their case for reinstatement and ordered each worker to pay 7,500 rupees to the company as court costs.

CWC labor director, T.F. Kathirvale, who appeared for workers in the LT case, told the WSWS: "This judgement is against workers. I have appeared in several cases for workers in the past but never heard of a judgement in which workers were ordered to pay the respondents."

According to Kathirvale, the judge dismissed the case claiming that workers had gone inside the manager's residence and harmed him. The police, however, have not yet even brought such charges to court.

The CWC bureaucrat said employees can file an appeal in the High Court if they can afford it! This means, however, that the workers would have to find a huge

amount of money to pay lawyers to appear in the higher court.

The CWC, like other trade unions, has collected member fees for decades. However, CWC bureaucracy have not paid the legal fees. Poverty-stricken workers have had to pay lawyers out of their meagre income as well as travelling expenses to attend the courts every three months over the past four years.

The CWC bureaucrats were directly involved in the conspiracy with the plantation management in arresting workers. However, the other trade unions including the National Union of Workers, Up-Country People's Front, Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union and All Ceylon Estate Workers Union controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have all refused to defend these workers.

The victimisation of these Alton employees is not an isolated case.

A few months after the repression at Alton, 11 workers were victimised and dismissed at Katukelle Estate in Talawakelle, also on false accusations. Five workers were sacked from the Velioya Estate near Hatton because they demanded subsidies during the COVID-19.

The Horana Plantation is one of the 22 large regional plantation companies and is part of the Hayley's Group, one of the top corporations in Sri Lanka.

All the tea plantation companies, aided by successive governments, are seeking to intensify the exploitation of employees and to lower the costs of production to compete in the global markets. They are bitterly hostile to workers' demands for higher wages.

One of the methods being pushed for is the "revenue share scheme" (RSM). Around 1,000 tea bushes would be distributed among workers. The inputs are supplied by the company and the workers look after the assigned plot, even using family members. After toiling, the worker receives only a small portion from the so-called revenue sharing arrangement.

This method of share cropping has been imposed in several estates but, in some cases, it had to be abandoned as a result of workers' opposition.

One of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s harsh austerity demands is that regional plantation companies must also face "economic restructuring."

The previous government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe began plans to ensure the profitability of the tea companies, including through crop diversification and tourism.

President Anura Kumara Disanayake, elected last year, has committed to fully implement the IMF agenda and

will accelerate efforts to make the plantations profitable at the expense of workers.

Plantation workers have to fight to defend their jobs and to win decent wages and conditions, including proper habitable housing.

In waging this struggle, it is imperative for all plantation workers to demand the withdrawal of all charges against the victimised Alton estate workers. All 38 workers must be reinstated immediately and paid back wages!

We call on all workers in Sri Lanka to support the struggle of their class brothers and sisters in plantations.

The SEP and the AWAC took initiative in defending the victimised Alton workers through an international campaign. Workers must learn lessons. The trade union bureaucracies have lined up with the companies and the government against their own members.

Workers have to form their own independent action committees to take the fight into their own hands. There will be no place for trade union bureaucracies and capitalist parties in these action committees.

The SEP and the AWAC are ready to assist workers to take this initiative.

The only way workers can defend their democratic and social rights is through a unified political struggle to dismantle the profit-driven system, establish a workers' and peasants' government and take measures to reorganise the economy. This includes nationalising key industries, the banks and estates and placing them under the democratic control of the working class.

This struggle is part of the fight for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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