

Eight Sri Lankan plantation workers arrested in company-police attack

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Eight striking workers from the Alton tea estate in the Up-Cot, Masekeliya area of central Sri Lanka were arrested and jailed by police on February 17.

The arrests are a part of a joint company-police operation aimed at breaking an indefinite strike by about 500 Alton workers who walked out on February 3 to demand a 1,000-rupee (\$US5.19) basic daily wage.

The Alton estate strikers are now demanding the immediate release of the eight workers—S. Puwanesary, Kanapathy Devi, G. Shatheeswary, Francis Thiresammal, Marimuthu Thamilselvi, Yohasakthi, M.K.Shaneethuni and Aandimuthu Visvakethu.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), Sri Lanka's main plantation union and a political partner of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government, has actively supported these attacks.

On February 17, strikers resisted police attempts to arrest the workers. But CWC leaders visiting the estate, including the union's vice president Kanagarai, Maskeliya area leader Rajaram and Senpahavally, who is also Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha chairman (a local government body), intervened to hand over the workers to the police.

CWC officials declared that the eight strikers would only be taken to the police station to record their statements. The arrested workers, however, were brought before the Magistrate's Court in Hatton, a major plantation town, and remanded for 14 days. They are now jailed in Kandy, the hill country's capital.

The witch hunting of Alton estate workers is part of broader government-company repression against plantation workers who are becoming increasingly hostile to their poverty-level wages, mounting workloads and the deepening attacks on their basic social and democratic rights.

In an attempt to contain this deep-seated anger and

impose a sell-out deal, the CWC called a one-day strike on February 5 to demand payment of the 1,000-rupee pay claim. Determined to win this long-outstanding pay rise and to secure other demands, some 200,000 plantation workers participated in the walkout.

Seizing on recent clashes between plantation workers and management, such as at the Alton estate, plantation companies have demanded increased state repression.

In a recent letter to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, Planters' Association of Ceylon secretary Lalith Obesekera called for state intervention against workers. Plantation managers confronted "an organised campaign of violence and intimidation... unleashed by thugs... in order to sabotage RPC [Regional Plantation Companies] tea production," Obesekera falsely claimed.

"We wonder how such a catastrophic breakdown of law and order is being allowed and why no meaningful action has yet been taken against those who are inciting violence on the estates."

Alton estate workers began their indefinite industrial action for higher wages two days before the CWC's February 5 national one-day strike. On February 2, a day prior to their walk out, Alton workers attempted to block a lorry transporting processed tea from the estate factory to Colombo.

The Alton estate manager responded by physically assaulting a female worker—a local CWC area leader—who was injured and hospitalised. The manager was arrested the following day after workers protested about the assault, but he was immediately brought before the courts and bailed out.

By contrast, when an estate manager called on the police to break up the workers' action on February 2, they immediately intervened, threatening workers and ordering them to allow the lorry to proceed. The vehicle

reached Mallihaipoo Junction, three kilometres from the estate factory. In an attempt to defuse Alton workers' anger, CWC leader Senpahavally intercepted the lorry at the junction and told the driver to return to the factory.

The CWC's collaboration with the company and the police against Alton workers is bound up with its attempts to break their strike, which continues in defiance of the union.

On February 7, about 50 striking Alton workers visited the office of CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman's office in Kotagala township to demand he support their indefinite walkout. Thondaman, who is the Rajapakse government's minister of estate infrastructure, refused.

Strengthened by the CWC's treachery, Alton estate management on February 15 organised a strike-breaking operation in one division of the estate. Angry strikers, however, intervened and blocked the plucked tea leaves being transported in a three-wheeler to another estate factory.

The following day a group of strikers demonstrated outside the estate manager's bungalow. Management responded by demanding that police arrest the workers, accusing them of "violence" during their protest against the scab operation.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a group of female Alton workers angrily denounced the treacherous role of the CWC. One worker explained that when the police arrived at the estate on February 17, they had no clear idea of who they planned to arrest. CWC leaders Kanagarai, Rajaram and Senpahavally, she said, selected the workers to be sent to the police station and urged them to go there.

Another Alton worker said, "We all united and blocked the arrest of the eight workers when the police arrived at the estate. But the CWC leaders said to us, 'The police will only get statements from them, so you should allow them to go to the police station.'

"We were all ready to demonstrate outside the police station to demand the release of all those arrested, but the union leaders would not allow us to go there. Instead of releasing the workers from the police station, they were taken to Dickoya Base Hospital for PCR tests, and then to court later that evening and they were remanded for 14 days.

"All of the trade unions have betrayed us. The police, the court, the trade unions and the government have

joined with the plantation companies and are working against us. We will not end the strike without winning their release. We call on all other workers to support our struggle."

The determined fight of Alton estate workers not only exposes how the police defend the plantation companies, but also how the CWC and other unions collaborate with the company and the police in witch-hunting workers.

In order to advance their struggle for decent wages and other basic social rights, plantation workers must break from the unions, form independent action committees based on a socialist program, and unite with other workers facing similar government and employer attacks.

The Socialist Equality Party has actively intervened in the plantation workers' struggle and in the February 5 one-day national strike, widely distributing its statement, "Reject wage proposals of plantation companies and unions! Fight on socialist program for decent wages and working conditions! Build action committee!"

Alton estate workers powerfully responded to the SEP's analysis and at a meeting addressed by this writer on February 21 agreed to establish an Action Committee at the estate. The meeting also passed a resolution pledging to campaign for the immediate release of the eight arrested workers and appealing to workers from other estates to join this struggle.



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