

Release jailed Sri Lankan estate workers! Defend all workers from company-police conspiracies!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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Eight workers from the Alton estate, which is owned by Horana Plantations Company in Sri Lanka, have been jailed in the Kandy remand prison until March 3 on the orders of a Hatton magistrate. They were arrested by police on February 18.

Alton estate is located in Upcot, Maskeliya in the central plantation district. All of the estate's 500 workers have been on strike since February 2 to demand higher pay and in protest against management's repressive actions.

The jailed workers, seven of whom are women, are: S. Puwanesary, Kanapathy Devi, G. Shatheeswary, Francis Thiresammal, Marimuthu Thamilselvi, Yohasakthi, M.K.Shanthini and Aandimuthu Visvakethu.

While no charges have been filed, the police have accused the workers of "unlawful assembly" and "grievous hurt" of estate manager Subash Narayanan. The workers, who have all denied the police allegations, are the victims of a conspiracy by the plantation company and the police to break their ongoing strike.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) condemn the arrests and demand the immediate release of the Alton workers. The SEP and the IYSSE urge plantation workers to call on the entire working class to defeat this vicious anti-democratic attack.

Alton estate workers have intensified their campaign for the release of their colleagues and established an action committee with the assistance of the SEP. There is widespread sympathy for the arrested Alton workers among plantation workers in the area, who all face similar conditions. The action committee must mobilise support from all sections of the working class and prepare for a general strike.

On February 24, lawyers for the eight workers filed a motion for bail at the Hatton magistrate's court. This was refused by the magistrate, following vehement opposition by the police who declared that they were searching for 18

more workers to arrest.

The police also presented a dubious video allegedly showing workers attacking the superintendent. The legally disputable video has been released to social media as part of a vicious attempt to intimidate all estate workers. If convicted, the eight workers could be imprisoned under Sri Lankan law for up to seven years for "grievous hurt" and six months for "unlawful assembly."

A series of incidents since early February indicate how Alton estate management, with police assistance, prepared their witch hunt. The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union which is part of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government, has aided and abetted this attack.

The CWC called a one-day strike on February 5 to "pressure" companies to grant a long-outstanding 1,000-rupee (\$US5.19) daily basic wage for plantation workers. Since 2015, the CWC and other plantation unions have consistently betrayed numerous strikes by plantation workers for this demand.

While the CWC's one-day protest was called to dissipate plantation workers' deep-seated anger, hundreds of thousands of workers joined the national strike.

Along with other plantation workers, the Alton employees decided to walk out earlier, on February 2, and opposed the transport of processed tea from the estate. The manager called on the police to break up the protest. Responding to workers' anger over this attack, a CWC area leader intervened and turned back the lorry transporting tea.

That day, the manager physically assaulted workers, injuring the arm of one of the female workers who had to be hospitalised. At first the police refused to take any action over the assault but, after angry demands by workers, decided to arrest the manager. He was brought before a local magistrate but immediately given bail.

The Alton estate workers decided to remain on strike after the February 5 walkout in protest against the ongoing management threats, and for immediate payment of the

1,000-rupee daily wage claim.

On February 7, about 50 workers lobbied CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman at his Kotagala union office, calling on him to support their indefinite strike. Thondaman, who is the Rajapakse government's minister for estate infrastructure, flatly refused.

Encouraged by the CWC's treacherous isolation of the Alton workers, estate management on February 15 organised a strike-breaking operation. They attempted to transport plucked tea leaves from one division of the estate in a three-wheeler to a factory in another estate. Angry strikers intervened and foiled the attempt.

On February 17, a group of strikers demonstrated outside the estate manager's bungalow opposing his provocative actions. Management is now using this incident against the workers.

The next day, Planters' Association Secretary Lalith Obesekera wrote to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse. Referring to the Alton strike, he declared: "We are concerned that an organised campaign of violence and intimidation is being unleashed by thugs who are inciting workers and non-workers in order to sabotage RPC [Regional Plantation Companies] tea production."

Police arrived at the estate that day searching for the eight workers they wanted to arrest. Confronting workers' opposition, the police were unable to carry out any arrests.

CWC area leaders Kanagarai, Rajaram and Senpahavally, however, told the eight workers to visit the Hatton police station and make statements. While the union officials falsely claimed the workers would be safe, they were immediately detained by police and a magistrate placed them in remand.

Workers must take this company-police conspiracy, aided and abetted by the CWC, as a serious attack on the entire working class. Not a single plantation union has condemned the arrests or demanded the workers' immediate release. This brutal anti-democratic assault is an attempt by the plantation companies to break the growing movement of estate workers for decent wages, jobs and other social rights.

Recent months have seen strikes at the Gartmore and Mocha estates and other plantations, along with rising opposition to the escalating Rajapakse government and big-business attacks on living conditions, jobs and wages.

These struggles are part of a growing movement of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally amid the deepening crisis produced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Sri Lankan economy is in a shambles with massive debts, reduced exports and devaluation of the country's currency.

Fearing the rising resistance of plantation workers, the Rajapakse government announced on February 12 that it would increase plantation workers' daily wage to

1,000-rupees. The plantation companies, however, refuse to pay even this meagre increase that does not compensate for the rising cost of living.

The plantation companies have declared that if forced to pay this amount they will reduce the working week to slash costs, drive up productivity, cut pensions and abolish other paltry social expenditure on their estates. The government is still in "discussions" with the companies.

Workers also confront escalating attacks by Rajapakse government, which is preparing a presidential dictatorship to repress workers' strikes and protests against its brutal austerity agenda. Colombo has imposed an essential services order on port workers and last week deployed the military to break protest strikes by health workers. Its repressive actions in the plantations are part of this broadening assault.

In order to defend their democratic and social rights workers must adopt an alternative program. They cannot rely on trade unions, which have been transformed into tools of the state and the capitalist class. Workers must break from the unions and build their own independent action committees to unite every section of the working class to defend their rights.

This struggle must become part of a broader fight by the entire working class against capitalism and for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist program, including the nationalisation of the large estates, big companies and banks, under workers' democratic control.

The SEP is the only party advancing this socialist and internationalist program. We urge workers and youth to join the SEP and fight for this perspective.



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