

Sri Lankan court imposes harsh bail conditions on Alton estate workers

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12 March 2021

On Wednesday, a magistrates court in Hatton, in central Sri Lanka, bailed 22 arrested Alton workers but with severe conditions. The arrested workers, many of whom had been on remand, are alleged to have assaulted the estate's superintendent, Subash Narayanan.

The repressive bail conditions imposed on each worker include:

- a cash deposit of 15,000 rupees (\$US76.34)—i.e., more than a plantation worker's average monthly wage
- two personal sureties from relatives, with each of them certified by an area village officer
- reporting in person to the Maskeliya police station near Alton every last Sunday of the month and signing a suspect's register

The bailed workers were also ordered to hand over their passports to the court. If they do not have a passport, they must submit an affidavit confirming this.

Ten of the accused workers were arrested with the assistance of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC)—eight on February 18 and two on March 1—and remanded until last Wednesday. The remaining 12 workers were presented to the police on Tuesday by the CWC and then produced in court the following day.

The entire list of arrested workers was drawn up by the police and Alton estate management with the help of the CWC. The next hearing is due to be held on April 28.

The estate companies and the police have branded the workers, who were simply fighting for their legitimate rights, as criminals. The planters' lawyer objected to any granting of bail and denounced the workers, claiming that they had engaged in violence, acted as thieves and vandalised property.

Defence lawyer Nehru Karunakaran countered these claims, explaining that the workers had not absconded but presented themselves to the court. The Alton plantation workers are accused of “unlawful assembly” and inflicting “grievous hurt” on the estate manager. They have denied all charges and any involvement in assaulting the manager. If convicted, they could be imprisoned for up to seven years for “grievous hurt” and six months for “unlawful assembly.”

A day before Wednesday's court hearing, Sri Lanka's National Security Council (NSC), headed by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, was scheduled to discuss “security in the plantations.”

Minister for Public Security Sarath Weerasekera, an ex-rear admiral, told the media that the issue would be discussed because the planters were demanding arms and weapons-training to protect them from so-called estate violence. On March 3, about 500 planters held a protest in Hatton demanding “more security” in the plantations, including police patrols.

It is not clear whether the NSC discussed the issue and what measures were planned. While proceedings in the high-level body are generally secret, the discussions are likely to have had a bearing on the repressive bail conditions imposed on the arrested Alton workers.

The brutal state repression of the Alton workers, including preparations to impose harsh prison terms, is a deliberate attempt to intimidate plantation workers and other sections of the working class now coming into struggle against employers and the government.

Contrary to government and planters' claims, it was Alton management that unleashed a series of provocations against the workers who walked out on strike on February 2 for higher pay. When workers blocked the transport of processed tea from the estate, they were assaulted by a manager who badly injured a

female employee.

Alton workers remained on strike the following day, in protest against management violence, and on February 5 joined hundreds of thousands of plantation workers in a national stoppage to demand that the daily wage be increased to 1,000 rupees (\$US5.00).

The February 5 strike was called by the CWC in an attempt to dissipate the rising anger of plantation workers against the refusal of the Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs) and the government to increase their poverty-level wages. The CWC is part of the Rajapakse government with its leader, Jeevan Thondaman, Sri Lanka's estate infrastructure minister.

The Alton manager continued his strike-breaking activities after February 5, including an attempt to transport tea to other factories. When workers opposed this provocation with a protest outside his bungalow on February 17, the event was seized on to falsely accuse them of violence.

Estate workers, who are one of the lowest paid sections of the Sri Lankan working class, have been demanding a 1,000-rupee daily wage in a series of strikes and protests since 2015. The struggles have consistently been betrayed by the CWC and the other plantation unions working hand-in-hand with consecutive Sri Lankan governments and the employers.

The RPCs continue to demand increased productivity and the reduction of production costs. In recent years, plantation owners have begun implementing a so-called income sharing scheme.

Under this share-cropping system, workers are assigned a certain number of tea bushes, which must be maintained and harvested by their whole family. Workers are then given a "share of income" from the harvest, after the company deducts the cost of supplies, such as fertilizer and equipment, and takes its profit.

When planters attempted to impose this system at some estates, workers went on strike after learning that it was impossible to live on the income generated under the scheme and that they would lose existing pensions.

Early this month, the Rajapakse government gazetted a 1,000-rupee daily wage, consisting of 900-rupee in basic pay and a 100-rupee allowance. The RPCs immediately rejected this and have threatened to cut the annual number of guaranteed working days if Colombo imposes the new 1,000-rupee payment.

In recent months, some estates, with the blessing of the government, have also started appointing retired military men as plantation supervisors. The *Tamil Mirror* has reported that the Makudugala and Kilandawane estate in the remote Ragala area in the central plantation district has employed military supervisors.

On March 8, workers went on strike at the estate after management proposed reducing tea cultivation in some parts of the plantation. The real reason for the walkout, however, seems to be workers' opposition to the appointment of military personnel.

The Rajapakse regime and the plantation bosses, however, are not just concerned about the rising anger and industrial action of plantation workers but developing strikes and protests by health, railway and port workers. Terrified by the growing unrest and social impact of COVID-19, the Rajapakse regime and the ruling elite are preparing for dictatorial forms of rule.

The increasing state repression in the plantations has not just exposed the treachery of the CWC but all the other plantation unions that function as political police. None of the estate unions—the Upcountry People's Front, the National Union of Workers, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-controlled All Ceylon Workers Union, the Democratic Workers Congress or the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union—have opposed the state frame-up and persecution of the Alton estate workers.

We urge all those who defend democratic rights to support the campaign being conducted by the Socialist Equality Party for the immediate withdrawal of all charges and the unconditional release of all Alton workers. Statements of support should be sent here.



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