Sri Lankan workers denounce state repression of Alton Estate workers

Our reporters
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A broad cross-section of Sri Lankan workers spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters last week, condemning the arrest of 22 Alton Estate workers and in support of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign for the dropping of all charges.

The Alton workers, who were striking for a wage rise and protesting a violent assault by the estate manager, were arrested following a conspiracy by the estate management, the police and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union. The frame-up of the Alton workers is part of a broader attack on the democratic rights of all Sri Lankan workers.

The arrested workers were released on bail last Wednesday but with punitive conditions. These included a cash deposit of 15,000 rupees ($US76.34), two personal sureties from relatives, each certified by an area village officer, the surrender of their passports and to report in person to the Maskeliya police station near Alton every last Sunday of the month.

On March 1, the SEP issued a statement entitled "Release jailed Sri Lankan estate workers! Defend all workers from company-police conspiracies!" The statement has won strong support from workers across the island.

Tharindu, a Sri Lanka State Pharmaceutical Corporation laboratory technician, denounced the arrest of the Alton workers. "It is clear that the bogus charges are an attempt to escalate the suppression of all workers.

"When I read your statement it reminded me of the life sentences imposed on 13 Maruti-Suzuki workers in India in 2017. A similar conspiracy is being unleashed against the Alton workers."

He added: "The government is on the side of the employers and the arrest of the Alton workers is a sign of how it is preparing to react to all class struggles. The working class must powerfully fight against this attack."

An office assistant from a Homagama college said that the plantation companies were attempting to intimidate and force estate employees to work under even harsher conditions.

"They are branding them 'terrorists'," he said, because they want to justify "even greater attacks on estate workers." Condemning the union's collaboration in this assault, he added, this "exposes who they are really working for."

A Colombo Port technician said that discussion of so-called violence in the plantations by the government's National Security Council indicated that plans were being made to escalate the attacks on the estate workers.

"These workers," he said, "are fighting for a decent living wage. The capitalists are extracting profit from workers engaged in production but it is a worker's right to get a living wage. The price of essentials has surged in recent years and so workers find it difficult to manage. Port workers have not had a pay increase for several years."

A container driver at the same port condemned the attack on Alton workers and said the estate workers had been fighting for a 1,000-rupee basic daily wage for years. "This is a justified and necessary fight," he said. "Workers can't even win a reasonable demand like this today because capitalism is in a big crisis.

"The rulers are preparing for military attacks against workers," he added, and referred to the appointment of a retired army commander to head the Ports Authority. This was part of the militarisation of the country, he said, pointing out that port workers were involved in an ongoing struggle against the privatisation of Colombo port.

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A worker from Deeside estate in Upcot said every worker had to support the Alton estate workers' struggle. "We faced a similar situation in 2016 when our daily workload was increased by two kilograms and so we went on strike without the consent of the trade unions. During that struggle seven workers were arrested and were blacklisted from the job. The SEP was the only organisation that supported and defended us through a powerful campaign that won the release of the arrested workers."

The plantation companies, he continued, have responded to the recent government decision to increase wages to 1,000 rupees per day, by threatening to cut working days to reduce their costs. "We have been fighting for this [1,000-rupee daily wage] since 2015 but all the trade unions have done is betray us."

A female worker from the same estate explained the difficult working conditions at the plantation. "Most of those arrested from Alton are women workers. Female workers are in the forefront of our wage struggle and we are suffering a lot. Even when we work for eight hours, sometimes we get only half a daily wage because we weren't able to meet our management production targets."

She recalled attending an SEP election meeting in the area several years ago and said that she now realised that the party's program was "100 percent correct."

A non-academic school worker in Chilaw, in the northwest, was aware of the brutal conditions in the plantations and said it was not different to those during British colonial rule. He condemned the frame-up of the Alton workers and called for their unconditional release.

"The arrest and jailing of workers who are involved a struggle for a living wage shows that the government and the plantation managers are escalating their attacks. This is in response to increasing competition in world markets and an attempt to increase profits by driving up productivity.

"Under conditions of rising coronavirus infections, estate workers and the garment workers are being subjected to brutal exploitation, which is promoted as 'development'," he said.

Teachers and non-academic school workers, he explained, had also been forced to work without adequate health and safety measures during the pandemic. Leave approvals were often rejected and the workload was piling up beyond the assigned duties, he added.

A medical doctor from Embilipitiya, a remote southern town, said that he was alarmed after reading a WSWS article on the Alton workers.

"When a lawyer for the company says there is 'terrorism' in the estates it is a serious matter. That the 'terrorist' label is being used is an indication that the government and the companies are preparing to suppress all estate workers. At the same time, they are trying to communally divide workers…

"I agree with what you propose—that the workers must build their own action committees and organise a common struggle against attacks of the employers and the government," the doctor said.

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