

Company-police witch hunt continues against Sri Lankan plantation workers

Our correspondents**22 March 2021**

The persecution of Alton Estate workers in Sri Lanka's central plantation district is continuing with five more workers ordered to visit Maskeliya police station and provide statements over their alleged involvement in an attack on the estate superintendent. The witch-hunt continues even as the company ordered striking employees to resume work this Wednesday.

The police, assisted by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation workers' union, previously arrested 22 workers, accusing them of physically assaulting estate superintendent Subash Narayanan. They were released on March 10 but with harsh bail conditions, including a 15,000-rupee (\$US76.34) cash deposit by each worker, personal sureties from two relatives, lodging their passports with the courts, and signing the local police register on the last Sunday of every month. The next hearing of their case is scheduled for April 28.

The Alton workers walked out on strike on February 2 for higher pay and then participated in the February 5 one-day national strike called by the CWC to demand a 1,000-rupee daily wage. While the union called the one-day national action to deflect mass anger among estate workers over their long-outstanding pay demand, the Alton workers remained on strike in protest against estate management aggression.

After launching a series of provocations to break the strike, Alton management seized on a protest by workers outside the superintendent's bungalow on February 17, claiming that he had been assaulted.

Last Wednesday, Regional Plantation Companies (RPC) senior official Roshan Rajadurai held a meeting of Alton union officials and the estate superintendent in the state labour office at Dick-Oya, near Hatton, to discuss a resumption of work. Rajadurai told union officials that management and workers had made mistakes but that "both sides should now work peacefully."

Rajadurai insisted, however, that the "legal action" against the workers should continue and he played a dubious video, said to be recorded during the alleged assault of the superintendent. The same video was used by Alton Estate's

lawyer in the Hatton court hearing. Local union officials from the CWC and National Union of Workers (NUW) who attended the meeting agreed with management and honoured the superintendent in a special prayer (pooja) at a Dick-Oya Hindu temple.

The CWC, along with the other plantation unions that isolated the Alton walkout, had wanted the strikers to return to work last week following the bailing of the arrested workers. The company, however, has delayed the resumption of work until this Wednesday.

While the CWC directly collaborated in the arrest of the workers, the other plantation unions, including the NUW, Democratic Workers Congress, Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union and All Ceylon Estate Workers Union are complicit, having silently endorsed the police-company witch hunt.

The latter two unions are controlled by the opposition United National Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna respectively. CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman is the Rajapakse government's current minister of estate infrastructure. Other plantation union leaders have served as ministers in previous governments.

On March 3, Ceylon Planters Society members demonstrated in Hatton accusing estate workers of "violence" and "terrorism" and calling on the government to provide weapons, and weapon training, to combat the alleged dangers. Last Monday Sri Lanka's National Security Council headed by President Rajapakse planned to discuss the "estates security issue."

Contrary to these hysterical claims, the police and company persecution of the Alton Estate strikers is sanctioned by the Rajapakse government and in line RPC preparation to intimidate and persecute any workers demanding higher pay or resisting increased productivity demands. The RPC has categorically rejected a grossly inadequate government proposal for a 1,000-rupee daily wage consisting of a basic 900-rupee payment and a 100-rupee allowance.

Speaking with the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday, an

Alton worker explained that the estate workers were fighting not just for their own families but for all Sri Lankan workers. He demanded the immediate withdrawal of all police charges and denounced the union for assisting the company. He said that Alton employees were currently discussing whether to return to work on Wednesday if the company does not provide work for those arrested.

The striking Alton workers have had no income since February 2 and only received food items worth 2,000 rupees from one NGO. The CWC, which collects high monthly subscriptions from its members, has not provided any strike pay, forcing workers to pay for food and others essentials with loans, including pawning small pieces of jewellery, and reduce their meals.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is appealing for workers and youth to support its campaign for the immediate withdrawal of all charges against the 22 arrested Alton workers. Please send statements of support to the following email address: wswscmb@sltnet.lk.

Published below are some of the statements already received.

The Health Workers' Action Committee in Sri Lanka issued a statement demanding the immediate acquittal of Alton Estate workers. It reads in part: "We also call on all health workers to come forward against this brutal crackdown in the plantations. The state repression in Alton is not just directed against these workers but is an attempt to intimidate all other sections of the workers, including in the health sector, now coming forward to fight the government's attacks. It must be defeated.

"The struggle for an adequate wage to live a decent life is a basic right for all workers. The government, which represents big business, is using the capitalist state apparatus—the police, the armed forces, the courts and prisons—against workers.

"Police repression in the plantations, the employment of ex-military men as supervisors in some estates, and the deployment of the military to hospitals to break last month's strike by hospital junior workers, reveals that a common attack is being conducted by the corporates and the Rajapakse government."

A nurse from Sirimavo Bandaranaike Hospital in Kandy denounced the media. "They [the media] gave first place to estate employers' campaign against workers. This reveals the duplicity of the bourgeois media," she said. "The unions do not stand for the workers. They are not concerned about us but only their perks and privileges and the interests of bosses. I don't see any difference between the estate and health sector unions."

The nurse said that estate children were admitted to her ward every day and that their illnesses were the result of

economic hardships. "Many of them are suffering from malnutrition and anaemia, while others suffer from worm disease. The plantation companies could grant workers' pay demands but they won't because it reduces their profits," she added.

Navaratne, a garment worker in Ratmalana, denounced the witch hunt of the Alton workers and said it was an attack on all workers, and said the treachery of the plantation unions was repeated in his industry. These organisations, he said, have been transformed into government and company tools.

A railway worker from Ratmalana said that workers at his plant had discussed the estate workers' struggle and supported their demand for higher wages. "A decent wage and an adequate living should be the right of every worker," he said and voiced his contempt for the unions.

"They are the same everywhere," he added. "These arrests and the company attempts to intimidate these workers is a suppression of democratic rights."

Two employees from the Kilinochchi Vanavil plant in Sri Lanka's far north, spoke in support of the Alton workers. The factory is owned by MAS, one of Sri Lanka's biggest garment manufacturers.

One of the workers said: "Persecuting the Alton workers for fighting for a decent wage is unacceptable. The salaries we get today are just not enough for a decent life because the cost of living is increasing unbearably. Instead of helping workers to fight these injustices, the unions are assisting the company and the police.

"Like those in the estates and other companies, we face similar economic hardships and hard working conditions. Our situation has worsened since the coronavirus pandemic began. Previously we had to stitch 45 pieces of cloth in an hour but this has now been increased to 120 pieces in an hour. Workers everywhere face common problems and a common struggle [against capitalism]."



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