Management suspends 38 Alton estate workers in Sri Lanka

Our reporters
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Alton estate management at Maskeliya, in Sri Lanka's central plantation district, has suspended 38 workers, alleging they were involved in a physical attack on the estate's superintendent. The employees were informed about the harsh punitive measure after returning to work on Wednesday, after a 47-day strike.

Alton workers immediately opposed the company's provocative actions and stopped work, demanding their victimised colleagues be immediately reinstated. They were persuaded by Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader Jeevan Thondaman to resume work on Friday, after he issued an empty promise to look into the suspensions. Thondaman is the minister of estate infrastructure in President Rajapakse's government.

Management's escalation of its anti-democratic attacks highlights the necessity for workers, students and youth to support the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign to defend the Alton estate workers. The SEP is demanding the unconditional reinstatement of all suspended workers and the withdrawal of the bogus charges, which are the product of a company-police conspiracy, aided and abetted by the CWC and other estate unions.

On February 18, eight workers were arrested on allegations of assaulting the estate superintendent Subash Narayanan, followed on March 1 by the arrest of two youth over the same claims. All were remanded in Kandy prison by a Hatton magistrate. The CWC later surrendered 12 more workers to the police. All those arrested were released on March 10, but on harsh bail conditions.

The company has prepared a list of 18 other workers, claiming they were also involved in the alleged assault. Four of those named have been asked to visit the Maskeliya police station today, for the second time, to give statements on the incident.

The police and estate management drew up the entire list of arrested and suspended workers, with the help of the CWC. Two other estate unions, the National Union of Workers and the Up-country People's Front, which are active at Alton estate, have silently endorsed the CWC's involvement in this anti-democratic attack.

The estate unions have also agreed with the company's decision to suspend those workers facing court, until their cases are heard. Management has declared that the other 18 workers will be served with interdiction letters.

The next hearing in the case against the 22 workers is to on April 28. They are to be tried on charges of unlawful assembly and causing grievous hurt to the estate manager. If convicted they could be imprisoned for up to six months and seven years respectively, for these charges.

Workers have denied being involved in any violence against the estate superintendent. Their only "crime" is to fight for higher wages, better working conditions and in opposition to the provocative actions by estate management.

Some 500 Alton estate workers initially walked out on February 2, to demand higher pay, and then joined the February 5 one-day national strike, called by the Ceylon Workers Congress over long outstanding calls for a 1,000-rupee daily wage.

The CWC called the one-day walkout to deflect the growing anger of estate workers over plantation companies' refusals to increase their pay.

Determined to secure a wage rise, the Alton estate workers resolved to remain on strike after the national walkout. Following a series of provocations initiated by the estate manager, they decided on February 17 to hold a demonstration outside his residence. Management then used the protest to claim that workers had assaulted the supervisor.

The ongoing witch-hunt against the estate workers is supported by all the regional plantation companies, which operate large tea and rubber estates in Sri Lanka. With the backing of successive governments, these companies have consistently refused to increase the poverty-level daily

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wage of estate workers, which is currently just 700 rupees ($US3.59).

Plantation companies are seeking to cut labour costs through so-called income sharing schemes. Under this system, a worker is allocated a certain number of tea bushes or rubber trees, which they and their family cultivate. The harvest is sold to the company, which deducts the cost of its supply of manure, chemicals and equipment, and its profit. The remaining income is paid to the worker.

While the unions fully support this program, estate workers have opposed it, because it reduces them to share-croppers and allows the company to eliminate workers' pensions and other limited hard-won gains.

Now facing tougher economic conditions, worsened by the coronavirus pandemic, the plantation companies are determined to drive up productivity and cut costs. The ongoing persecution, including suspensions and possible jailing, of Alton estate workers makes clear that big business, with the blessing of the government and the trade unions, is prepared to do anything to achieve its aims.

Earlier this month, responding to bogus allegations by the planters of workers' "violence," the government's National Security Council discussed so-called security issues in the plantations.

The Rajapakse government, however, confronts not just the mounting anger of estate workers, but a rising tide of working-class demands over wages, jobs and working conditions. Last week saw strikes and protests by teachers as well as health, power, water board, railway and garment workers.

We urge workers, youth and all those concerned about the increasing government and employer attacks on basic democratic rights, to defend the Alton Estate workers. Please send statements of support to this address wswscmb@sltnet.lk.

We publish below some of the comments we received last week.

An Esquel garment factory worker from **Ja-Ela** denounced the anti-democratic attack on the Alton workers. She said Esquel garment employees have been demanding the company pay a New Year bonus. The company has refused, telling workers that it cannot provide a bonus payment because of the pandemic.

"We have to campaign against the witch-hunt of these workers, because this is part of an attack by employers against all of us," she said. "The harsh charges against the arrested workers must be dropped."

Referring to the low wages paid to garment industry workers, she added, "Estate workers also receive a poverty wage and I think their pay should be increased to at least 1,000 rupees. We must also campaign for their pay to be increased."

P. Chathuranga, a teacher from Mathugama, said: "The government and the companies, which won't grant the workers' wage demand, are trying to intimidate and suppress them. I oppose this joint witch-hunt by employers, the state and the trade unions.

"We teachers have similar experiences. Capitalist governments have not resolved the wage issues facing teachers for decades, and have gravely suppressed teachers' attempts to fight this. I think the entire working class should join in the struggle to stop the repression of the estate workers."

W. S. Murali, a construction worker from northern Jaffna, said: "All the leaders of the plantation unions have been ministers and worked for the government, so it is no surprise that they support the arrests of the Alton estate workers. I urge all workers and youth to fight for the release of the plantation workers." He referred to Colombo's 30-year communalist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the bloody military repression of Tamils, and the ongoing incarceration of young people.

A newspaper cartoonist sent the following statement:

"I vehemently oppose this repression. This is an intensification of the repression carried out by companies and the police for a long time. All the information available shows that this is a frame-up against workers.

"What I understood is that the companies, police and the government are jointly involved in this witch-hunt. It is a serious thing that the planters are demanding weapons to use against the workers."

He said that workers in every country were beginning to resist the escalating attacks of the capitalist class, and pointed out that freedom of expression was also under attack in Sri Lanka and other countries. "As the enemies of workers have united in attacking workers, we need to prepare a united struggle from our side against this assault."

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