

Sri Lankan plantation company terminates 38 Alton estate workers

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The Horana Plantation Company (HPC) in Sri Lanka, which runs the Alton estate, has sacked 38 workers, alleging they were involved in a physical assault on the estate's manager and assistant manager. This is a blatant attack on the democratic rights of the Alton workers, and more broadly a warning to the entire working class.

On March 22, HPC management issued letters to the 38 workers informing them of the punishment being imposed. A Tamil-language version of the letter said they were "suspended" from their jobs. Union bureaucrats also told the victimised workers that they had been "suspended."

WSWS reporters obtained the Tamil- and English-language versions of the letters. The English-language letter was headed "The letter of dismissal" and signed by the Deputy General Manager (DGM) of corporate affairs, Pusphika Samarakoon.

After listing various allegations, the letter stated: "Under the above circumstances, a decision has been taken by the Employer/Company to summarily terminate services with immediate effect." It added: "You are also informed that the factory, office and fields are out of bounds for you from now on."

A lawyer from the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which is defending the victimised workers, telephoned DGM Samarakoon on Wednesday to find out why there was a discrepancy between the Tamil and English wordings of the company's arbitrary punishment.

Samarakoon said: "It is summary termination. [The Tamil] translation is unsigned. We have signed the original [in English]. It is very clear."

Asked whether there had been "any kind of inquiry before this termination?" he said, "No" and declared that in cases directly involving workers and their superiors: "We don't generally have a domestic

inquiry... [I]t's a severe offence, therefore on a summary termination, we don't hold an inquiry."

The HPC management letters allege that on February 17 workers physically assaulted the estate manager Sathyamoorthy Subash Narayanan and assistant manager Anushan Thiruchelvam who were injured and had to be hospitalised.

The letters claim that the 38 sacked workers were part of a mob and "accountable for the aforesaid acts of misconduct in addition to breaking the law and order on the estate, whilst creating breach of peace as well and therefore guilty of Collective Misconduct." The sacked workers have categorically denied that they were involved in any physical assault of the manager and assistant manager.

Samarakoon's arrogant rejection of any inquiry and his justification of the summary sackings are a blatant violation of basic legal requirements and a denial of the fundamental democratic right of workers to defend themselves from false claims by employers.

HPC, which is controlled by the Hayleys Group, one of the biggest conglomerates in Sri Lanka, has simply decided to charge the workers, hold its own so-called preliminary inquiry without even issuing a formal charge sheet or allowing workers to defend themselves, declared them guilty and imposed its punishment.

The entirely anti-democratic procedure is reminiscent of the brutal treatment of workers by British companies during colonial rule. Even after Sri Lanka's formal independence in 1948, these companies continued their dictatorial methods. That year, the Sri Lanka government abolished the citizenship rights of Indian-origin workers, unleashing ethnic discrimination and ensuring the ongoing oppression of estate workers.

Plantation workers continued to be treated in the same ruthless manner, even after Colombo nationalised

the estates in 1972 and then privatised them in 1990. Estate workers have a long history of opposition and have engaged in major struggles against this oppression.

HPC management claims that about 80 people, workers and non-workers, were involved in the alleged assault and are demanding information from estate workers about the other participants.

On February 2, about 500 workers went on strike to demand a 1,000-rupee daily basic wage and blocked management's attempt to transport processed tea leaves. The manager assaulted workers, injuring one female worker's hand who had to be hospitalised.

Alton workers joined a one-day national strike, called by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) on February 5, over the same demand but remained on strike in protest against management threats. On February 15, management sought to sabotage the strike by trying to move tea leaves to another factory. Workers foiled this attempt and held a protest outside the manager's residence.

Claiming that workers had used violence against managers, the company initiated its witch hunt involving the police and with the full backing of the CWC, which drew up a list of workers and told them to surrender to the police.

On February 18, police arrested eight workers and on March 1 two youth were taken into custody. They were remanded in Kandy prison by a 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 HPC named 18 other workers, four of whom were summoned to Maskeliya police station on March 29 and their statements recorded. They were told to appear in court on April 28, along with all the other arrested workers.

While CWC is directly responsible for the witch hunt and sacking of the Alton estate workers, the National Union of Workers (NUW) and Up-County People's Front (UPF) have remained silent, tacitly supporting this attack on democratic rights.

On March 23, all employees on an instruction from the union, reported back to work, only to discover that 38 had been denied work. They immediately walked out, demanding the reinstatement of all victimised workers. CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman, who is the

estate infrastructure minister in the Rajapakse government, persuaded strikers to resume work on Friday, assuring them that he would investigate the victimisations.

The sacking of the Alton estate workers followed a provocative protest in Hatton on March 3 organised by the Planters Society and backed by all regional plantation companies. The planters demanded weapons and training to deal with alleged violence in the estates. Early last month Sri Lanka's National Security Council discussed so-called security issues in the plantations.

The ruthless crackdown at Alton is a warning that big business with government and union backing, is determined to drive up productivity, cut costs and impose the economic burdens worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic onto the working class.

This week the Alton estate action committee, formed with the assistance of the SEP, met and decided to wage a campaign for reinstatement of all sacked workers and the withdrawal of the frame-up charges. If the arrested workers are found guilty, they could be jailed for up to seven years for "grievous hurt" of the managers and six months for "unlawful assembly."

The SEP's fight against the witch hunt and arrest the Alton estate workers is an integral part of the struggle to defend the basic democratic rights of all Sri Lankan workers now under attack by the government and big business.

Please send statements of support to this address wswscmb@sltnet.lk.



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