Sri Lankan workers denounce Alton Estate witch hunt

Our reporters
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Last week Alton Estate management in Maskeliya, in Sri Lanka's central plantation district, terminated 38 workers.

The victimised workers, who were summarily dismissed without any investigation or right of appeal, have been accused of attacking the estate's manager and assistant manager during a recent pay strike. The sackings are part of an ongoing witch hunt against militant employees by estate management and the police, in collaboration with the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation trade union.

About 500 Alton Estate workers walked out on strike on February 2 to demand a 1,000-rupee ($US4.96) daily wage. They returned to work on March 26, following a directive from the CWC.

Alton Estate bosses used an angry protest by workers outside the manager's bungalow on February 17 as an excuse to launch an anti-democratic attack, claiming that protesters assaulted the manager and an assistant manager. Twenty workers and two youth were later arrested by police and held in remand until March 20, when they were released on harsh bail conditions.

The CWC fully backed the frame-up operation, compiling a list of workers and surrendering them to the police. The company then drew up another list of 18 workers, four of whom were summoned to Maskeliya police on March 29 and their statements recorded. All 38 workers and two youth have been ordered to appear in courts on April 28 to face charges.

While the CWC, which is part of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government, has directly collaborated in the frame-up, the other plantation unions—the National Union of Workers, the Democratic Workers' Congress, the Up Country People's Front, and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union—have done nothing to aid the Alton workers.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has launched an island-wide campaign to defend the Alton Estate workers. It is demanding immediate reinstatement of all sacked employees and the withdrawal of all the bogus charges. The campaign is winning broad support from plantation workers and other sections of the Sri Lankan working class.

J. Sahayalohini, 47, a female worker from Deeside Estate at Up-Cot in Maskeliya, said: "Sacking those workers is a grave warning to all of us, and if we allow this, we'll face the same situation. While the CWC limited the strike for a 1,000-rupee daily wage to just one day [on February 5], the Alton Estate workers continued their strike for nearly two months. All workers must fight to defend them."

Commenting on the unions' refusal to oppose increases in the daily workload by 1 kilogram of plucked tea leaves, she said: "They have betrayed us."

An Alton Estate worker (name withheld for security reason) said she had been a casual employee at the plantation's tea factory for over five years.

"The factory was closed after the strike ended and 60 workers lost their jobs. Management sent us to do field work, but because I'd only been trained for factory employment, it was very difficult.

"CWC leader Jeewan Thondaman called the strike on February 5, but now he has completely abandoned us. During last year's [parliamentary] elections, he said the Rajapakse government would do a lot of things for us. He is now a government minister but is doing nothing for us, and the CWC has supported management dismissing 38 workers."

A sacked female worker from Alton Estate said, "The company cheated us when it issued its termination letters. The letter in Tamil said we have been only 'suspended,' but according to the letter in English we

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have been sacked. None of the unions informed us of this [discrepancy]. We only found out about it through your party."

The 1,000-rupee daily wage, she said, was a fraud. "We are paid according to tea leaves we pluck and only receive 55 rupees per kilogram. This means that when we fulfil our daily target of 16 kilogram we only receive 880 rupees. If we pluck less than that we get an even smaller amount, and we are also not being paid the promised 100-rupee allowance.

"Management is planning to remove other benefits, such as medical and child welfare, and there's a danger that the number of working days will be reduced. Some estates have already started implementing these measures."

P. Sundararaj, 45, from Glenugie Estate, Up-Cot, said the victimisation of Alton Estate workers was a serious warning for all employees in the sector and more broadly. "They've been terminated through frame-up charges, which means this can happen to other workers very soon. We cannot trust the unions but must take the fight into our own hands."

Sundararaj said that Glenugie Estate workers did not receive the 1,000-rupee daily wage and on April 9, workers were paid according to the kilos of tea leaves they had plucked. "We refused to accept this," he said, "and so management promised to pay a 1,000-rupee daily wage but we don't believe their promise."

Hemal Deepthi Kumara, a teacher from Bandarawela, said that he only heard about the Alton Estate witch hunt workers through the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"It's clear that this is a combined conspiracy by the company, police and the trade unions," he said and pointed out that line-room accommodation for plantation workers and their families in Sri Lanka was "like a hell on the earth." These workers, he continued, "do not have enough food and there's no decent health facilities."

The courageous and determined two-month strike by Alton Estate staff, he said, "should inspire teachers and every other worker." Kumara referenced the mass protests of tens of thousands of teachers on April 7 and called for a united struggle by all sections of the working class.

"The trade unions, of course, are against this sort of unity. In fact, at the teachers protest we should have chanted slogans, 'Withdraw all frame up charges against Alton Estate workers! Reinstate them immediately!' Only in that way will other workers understand that the attack on Alton workers is an attack on all of us. Only then we can create a powerful and united struggle."

The SEP urges workers, students and youth to support its campaign in defence of the Alton Estate workers. Please send all statements of support to this address wswscmb@sltnet.lk.

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