

Alton Estate workers in Sri Lanka confront harsh and worsening social conditions

M. Thevarajah**27 May 2021**

The ongoing company witch hunt against Alton Estate workers near Maskeliya began early this year in response to workers' determination to win better wages and improved living conditions. The Alton workers, who walked out on February 2, participated in a one-day national plantation workers' strike three days later and continued their industrial action until March 22 in protest against estate management harassment.

Twenty-four workers and two youth were then framed up by the company and the police, aided and abetted by the Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), on false accusations of physically assaulting the estate's managers. These workers now face a criminal court trial. The Horana Plantation Company, which runs Alton Estate, has sacked a total of 38 workers, including those to be tried, without conducting any investigation or allowing any right of appeal against its dictates.

The horrendous conditions confronting Alton Estate workers, however, are not unique but typify the plight of tens of thousands of plantation workers across the country who are barely surviving on below poverty-level wages without adequate healthcare, education and housing. This social disaster has been created by the profit-hungry plantation companies with the blessing of successive governments and the active support of the trade unions.

Five hundred workers are currently employed in the four divisions of the Alton Estate. Unemployment and lack of job opportunities in the area is so bad that about 200 youth from the estate have had to move to Colombo or other areas to try and find work.

On average, plantation workers are currently supposed to earn at least 24,000 rupees (\$US100) a month, following a recent government-endorsed wage hike that increased their daily pay to 1,000 rupees (900 rupees basic and a 100-rupee allowance, about \$US5), if they work for a statutory 24 days.

However, pension fund deductions, a religious festival advance payment and small loans substantially reduce their take-home pay. While the government-endorsed 1,000-rupee daily wage was in order to deflect the hostility of plantation workers, most of the estate companies have refused to pay this amount unless workers increased their daily workload.

An Alton Estate worker recently explained to the *World*

Socialist Web Site that she worked for 19 days last month and was paid 19,000 rupees. After pension fund and festival advance loan deductions, she received just 13,570 rupees. Alton Estate management is demanding its workers pluck 18 kilograms of tea per day in order receive the 1,000-rupee daily wage.

She said that her husband is unable to work because he is ill and has to be taken to hospital every week. The couple need 15,000 rupees per month just for food.

COVID-19 has heavily impacted on the Sri Lankan economy, resulting in shortages of essential items that have pushed up prices. Plantation workers are amongst the hardest hit sections of the working class.

While many Alton Estate workers are living in old, substandard and overcrowded line rooms, (about 12 foot by 10 foot or 3.6 metres by 3 metres), an estimate of 100 families at the plantation do not even have these facilities.

Accommodation in the estate's lower division is situated next to a river. During the rainy season the river overflows, flooding houses and forcing workers and their families to leave their belongings and to flee to camps on higher ground. The company and the union leadership have repeatedly made empty promises to provide alternative homes. Rudimentary water and toilet facilities have not been provided by Alton management, but by a non-government organisation.

The estate has a dispensary but no doctor. On some days an Estate Medical Assistant (EMA) from Fairlawn Estate visits the dispensary for one or two hours to see Alton workers. The plantation companies employ the EMAs, who are not fully qualified doctors and are paid low salaries. Like other estates, the Alton Estate dispensary does not stock essential medicines.

In order to see a doctor, Alton Estate workers have to travel over 10 kms to Maskeliya or 15 kms to Dickoya hospital, neither of which are properly equipped. With no regular bus services in this area, people have to hire three-wheeler taxis or other vehicles, paying up to 1,000 rupees for a return trip.

Most of the children of plantation workers suffer from malnutrition while pregnant mothers are unable to secure nutritious food or access to decent medical facilities. Child mortality rates in the plantation areas are among the highest in Sri Lanka.

M., a female Alton Estate worker who was dismissed from her job after the strike, spoke with the WSWS. Five members of her family have been sacked.

She explained: "My son suffered a stroke when he was seven years old so we have to go to hospital frequently. A doctor at Kandy hospital advised us to go to the children's hospital in Colombo, but we have to spend about 6,000 rupees to get to [Colombo] on a three-wheeler. We can't afford this sort of expense."

U., another sacked worker, explained that her son has kidney problems and frequently has to be taken to a hospital clinic. Her husband works in Colombo. "My colleagues who lost jobs are doing casual work at a private estate far away but I'm not able to join them because of my son's health problem."

Plantation workers are becoming increasingly concerned about the surging number of COVID-19 infections across the country. Lack of sanitary facilities and overcrowded line rooms with no possibility of social distancing could see a rapid spread of the deadly virus in the plantations.

The upper division of the Alton Estate has a school with students from other divisions having to walk long distances to attend.

The school conducts classes up to Grade 11 but the building, which was initially constructed to accommodate classes up to Grade 5, is inadequate and detrimental to proper studies. Most of the children, however, leave school before reaching Grade 11, because their parents cannot afford their education.

Those students able to undertake higher studies, have to travel to Maskeliya. Only three students from the estate were able to enter university in the recent period.

Last year, the company distributed about 20 hectares of abandoned estate land among retired workers to cultivate tea. The workers had to pay the costs of cultivation and provide the harvest to the company. After this year's strike the company resumed possession of the land.

P. Ponaiyah, a retired Alton Estate worker, said they signed an agreement with the company but were not given a copy thus preventing them taking any legal action over the company's repossession.

The Socialist Equality Party and the Alton Workers Action Committee have launched a campaign demanding the withdrawal of police-company frame up charges against the Alton Estate workers and unconditional reinstatement of all sacked workers.

Please send all statements supporting the defence campaign to this address: wswscmb@sltnet.lk.

Recently received statements are published below.

A Sri Lankan migrant worker at an Iribia garment factory in Jordan wrote: "I vehemently condemn the dismissal of 35 workers at Alton Estate. They are facing injustice. We demand that the company reinstate those sacked workers. We [in Jordan] also face the same difficult conditions as the Alton workers."

She went to explain that then when migrant garment workers face injustices and seek protection from the Sri Lankan embassy they are advised not to make any complaints.

"The embassy, however," she said, "hands over the details of the person who made the complaint to the factory managers the very next day. They, in turn, use those details to intimidate the workers..."

"Workers at Alton have opposed the unions. That is good but other workers should support them. I appreciate your attempt to gather such a support," she added.

Harvey, from the US, wrote: "Please add my support for demanding all charges be dropped and all workers be given their jobs back, including compensation for all pay lost, with respect to what is clearly a frame-up by the Horana Plantation Company at its Alton Estate.

"I am a retired teacher in New York City. Why am I writing on this anti-worker attack in Sri Lanka? Aside from being a tea drinker and aware of how this cup of beverage I hold in my hands daily has passed through the hands of hard-working plantation workers, I think the global pandemic sweeping around the world makes all workers comrades against the intensified assault on our rights and living standards perpetrated by the capitalist class. Chief of these is the great amount of death and sickness that they have allowed and abetted with their policies but also the attempt to take advantage of our hardships to impose still further oppressive exploitation.

"Even in New York, there are ongoing attacks on jobs, wages, benefits, and working conditions. The division of humanity by nations serves only the rich whose wealth is protected and expanded by each state, as all are controlled by the capitalists.

"I appreciate the coverage of the *World Socialist Web Site* that informs the working class of the details of this case and many others. I look forward to the joining with the Alton Estate workers in the international struggle to end the system that is trying to suppress their fight for justice, economic and political as well as legal.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact