

Sri Lankan police move to establish permanent base at Alton Estate

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In line with the ongoing witch hunt against workers at Alton Estate near Maskeliya in the central tea plantation district, Sri Lankan police are attempting to set up a special base inside the plantation. The estate is managed by Horana Plantations and owned by Hayleys, one of Sri Lanka's leading conglomerates.

Last week, an assistant police superintendent from Hatton visited the plantation, as part of plans to use the estate's cultural hall for the outpost. Workers opposed the provocative move, pointing out that the hall is used for a range of social functions, including wedding ceremonies.

Informed by local union officials, Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader Jeevan Thondaman visited the estate. He did not oppose the police plan but simply asked that a different location be found on the estate. Thondaman is President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's state minister of estate housing & community infrastructure. The police are currently looking for another site and are in regular contact with management.

Alton Estate workers voiced their concerns to the *World Socialist Web Site*. One of them stated: "Now they are trying to put the police post at the estate's dispensary, but we will oppose that as well."

The establishment of a police post on the estate is a continuation of the joint management-police conspiracy, aided and abetted by the CWC, against the Alton Estate workers.

They walked out on February 2 demanding higher wages and then participated in a February 5 national strike called by the CWC for a 1,000-rupee (\$US5) daily wage. The CWC called the limited national walkout to head-off growing demands for industrial action by plantation workers across the island.

Alton Estate management immediately began harassing the strikers. When workers protested outside the manager's residence, the company used this to falsely claim that strikers had physically assaulted the manager

and assistant manager.

The police arrested 24 workers and two youths. They face prosecution on bogus criminal charges. The Horana Plantation Company then summarily sacked 38 workers, including the 24 charged by police, without any investigation or right of appeal. The CWC backed all of these attacks, providing the police with the names of the workers to be arrested and allowing the company to dismiss them.

The CWC's support for a police post on Alton Estate marks a new stage in the anti-democratic attack on plantation workers. While the National Union of Workers (NUW) and the Up-country People's Front (UPF) have members at Alton Estate, those organisations have also not opposed the current state provocation or the previous frame ups and victimisations.

Alton Estate management and other plantation bosses used the strikers' protest outside the manager's residence to call on the Rajapakse government to step up repression on the estates. On March 3, around 500 planters demonstrated in Hatton demanding police "patrols" on the estates. They provocatively called for guns, and weapons training, to deal with "estate violence."

Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara responded by assuring the regional plantation companies that the government would "ensure security was provided to estate management." He promised that this issue would be discussed in the National Security Council, chaired by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Last April, President Rajapakse, in an attempt to defuse the rising anger of estate workers, ordered the plantation bosses to provide a 1,000-rupee daily wage, which included 900 rupees basic pay and a 100-rupee allowance. The plantation companies, however, have resisted this directive and are now demanding increased daily picking targets.

Alton Estate workers, for example, who fail to reach the

company's new daily target of 18 kilograms of tea are only paid 500 rupees, or half the 1,000-rupee daily rate, even if they pluck 17 kilograms. And those who reach the set target are not paid extra for additional amounts plucked.

According to one Alton Estate worker, management is also hiring retired workers on a low-wage casual basis, paying only 40 rupees for a kilogram of plucked tea leaves. To reach the 1,000-rupee daily rate, they have to pluck 25 kilograms, an impossible amount. These brutal demands, which have been endorsed by the CWC, the NUW and the UPF, and are being imposed on other estates, are sparking a wave of resistance by plantation workers.

* Last week, nearly 300 workers from the lower- and middle-divisions of Kotiyagala Estate at Bogawantalawa walked out in protest against cuts to the number of working days.

"Management is giving us just two days work a week and eight days a month," workers told the media. "How can we live on this wage? Managers are forcing us to pluck 18 kilograms of tea leaves per day, but this target is very difficult to reach. The trade unions are doing nothing to stop this but on the contrary, the CWC has joined with the management to implement these demands."

* Maskeliya Lanka Estate workers demonstrated on June 16 near the tea-leaf weighing centre, carrying placards and chanting slogans declaring that the promised 1,000-rupee daily wage was a deception.

* Workers from five divisions of the Maskeliya Glentilt Estate walked out for three days last week, opposing management demands that they pluck 20 kilograms a day.

* On Monday, Drayton Estate DT division workers protested against management's demands that they had to pluck 20 kilograms of tea for three consecutive days.

These recent actions are part of a growing list of demonstrations and industrial action now erupting in the country's plantation districts. UPF leader V. Radhakrishnan recently admitted to the media that workers were coming to his union office "complaining about oppression by the estate management, following the wage increase."

Sri Lanka's low-paid plantation workers, who lack proper safety equipment and live in small dwellings where social distancing is impossible, are also being heavily impacted by COVID-19, which is rapidly spreading in the plantation areas.

By June 9, Nuwara Eliya, the country's main plantation district, recorded 5,342 infections with 78 deaths and

3,915 families affected. While many of these victims could be estate workers, no details have been released.

Even though testing rates are very low, 46 cases were recently reported from five estates in Bogawantalawa, including in Tientsin and Kilani. Workers from Welioya Estate, near Hatton, recently protested to demand payment of promised, but still outstanding, quarantine relief.

On June 11, 50,000 health workers held a national five-hour strike, the second island-wide protest this month, to demand special allowances and increased safety measures to protect them from the rising tide of coronavirus infections.

Nervous about this growing movement, on May 27 and June 2 President Rajapakse invoked draconian essential service orders to ban all state-sector strikes, punishable with heavy fines and jail terms. Last Friday, the government extended this to include the postal services. The trade unions have silently endorsed all these repressive measures.

The frame up and ongoing victimisation of Alton Estate workers, and the government's escalating anti-democratic attacks on the state sector employees, can only be defeated through a break with the unions and the development of an independent movement of the working class. This requires the building of action committees and other rank-and-file organisations based on the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The Alton Workers Action Committee and the Socialist Equality Party have launched a defence campaign demanding the unconditional release of the victimised Alton Estate workers, the dropping of all charges and the reinstatement of every sacked worker. We urge workers throughout Sri Lanka and internationally to support this campaign, including by passing workplace resolutions and sending statements of support to this address wswscmb@sltnet.lk.



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