Company and police harassment continues against Alton Estate workers in Sri Lanka

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On July 14, a Hatton magistrate postponed a planned court hearing against Alton Estate workers until October 27. The trial was originally scheduled to begin on May 28 but had been delayed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The case against the 24 Alton Estate workers and two youths is a frame-up by the company and the police, assisted by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC). The company and police falsely claim that the workers physically attacked the estate's manager and assistant manager. The victims have categorically rejected the allegations.

Alton Estate is located near Maskeliya in central Sri Lanka and is part of Horana Plantations, which is controlled by Hayleys, one of the country's biggest companies.

Once again, the reason given for the postponement of the trial was the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Authorities, however, did not inform the workers in advance, forcing them to travel over 12 kilometres to the courts in a crowded bus to find out that the case would not be heard for more than four months.

The lawyer defending the framed up workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the police have still not presented charge sheets despite the workers being placed on bail under harsh conditions on March 10.

The police delay in filing charges points to the fabricated nature of the allegations and is part of the continuing attempts to intimidate and harass the workers. The 26 people facing trial are being treated like criminals. Under their bail conditions they must visit Maskeliya police station on the last Sunday of every month and sign a register.

The witch hunt began early this year when 500 Alton Estate workers walked out on February 2 to fight for higher wages and improved living conditions. Three days later they joined a one-day national strike called by the CWC to demand a 1,000-rupee ($US5) daily wage. While nearly 150,000 estate workers participated in the national walkout, the CWC called the industrial action to dissipate their widespread anger and frustration over the poverty-level wages and the union's refusal to fight for the long-pending demand.

Alton Estate workers remained on strike for another 47 days in protest against provocations by plantation management. On February 17, workers protested outside the estate manager's residence over this harassment. Horana Plantations seized on the demonstration to launch a police witch hunt, claiming the protesters attacked the estate managers.

In March, the company summarily sacked 38 Alton Estate workers, including the 24 workers facing court, without any investigation into the claims they assaulted the managers, and no right of appeal. These workers, who have no income, have been blacklisted by Alton Estate management and are being prevented from finding employment at other estates.

Last May, 12 of the suspended workers were given casual jobs at Luccombe Estate, about 12 kilometres from Alton. In June, however, the van they were travelling in to Luccombe Estate was stopped by Maskeliya police and the workers told that the vehicle could not proceed because of COVID-19 health regulations. The police took the license of the driver and told the mainly female workers they would have to walk the remaining 10 kilometres to Luccombe

One of the workers told the WSWS that she believed Alton Estate management were involved. "As we were leaving the Alton Estate, we saw that a supervisor noted our vehicle's number. I'm sure that he provided the information to the police. When we were stopped by police, which was outside a police station, we saw

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an Alton Estate assistant manager inside."

She explained that the police had stopped the van at 8.30 a.m. and that it took the workers until 11a.m. to walk to Luccombe Estate. "This meant we could only pluck 5kg of tea leaves and were paid just 200 rupees [$US1] that day. After this incident the owner of the Luccombe Estate refused to give us any more work." Estate management and the police, she added, treat them like terrorists and are trying to starve them.

Last month a Hatton assistant police superintendent provocatively visited the Alton Estate, attempting to use its Cultural Hall for a police post inside the plantation. When this was opposed by estate workers, police decided to establish a police station in the small township bordering the estate.

The ongoing witch hunt at Alton Estate is a part of stepped up action by the plantation bosses and the police, with the assistance of the CWC, against the growing numbers of plantation workers determined to put an end to poverty-level wages, increasing workloads and harsh social conditions.

Concerned that the unions may lose control of the plantation workers, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse in January ordered companies to pay a 1,000-rupee daily wage, made up of a 900-rupee basic amount and a 100-rupee allowance. CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman falsely claimed this as a victory for workers. The CWC is part of the Rajapakse government with Thondaman the state minister for estate infrastructure.

Estate companies have resisted paying the increase and have instead boosted workloads, setting impossible targets and slashing wages. The new daily tea plucking target for Alton Estate workers has been increased to 18 kilos. If a worker fails to reach that target, he or she is only paid 500 rupees that day.

Since April, struggles have erupted at one estate after another in opposition to the increased workloads and wage cuts. Recent weeks have seen workers protest at the Drayton, Hatton, Kotiyagala, Bogawantalawa, Lanka, Maskeliya and Glenuge estates in the Nuwara Eliya district.

President Rajapakse, who continues to insist that he has addressed the estate wage issue, is totally silent about the wage cuts and increased workloads. The CWC and other plantation unions—the National Union of Workers, Up-country Peoples' Front and Democratic Workers Congress—are all backing the estate companies and doing everything they can to block or scuttle workers' protests and industrial action.

Plantation workers and the working class as a whole can only win a decent living wage, defend their social rights, and defeat government and employer repression, as part of a unified struggle, independent of the trade unions, and on the basis of socialist policies.

The Alton Workers Action Committee (AWAC) is fighting for this unity and campaigning to demand the dropping of all charges against the 24 Alton Estate workers and two youth, and for the unconditional reinstatement of all sacked workers. The ongoing repression at Alton Estate must be ended.

The Socialist Equality Party and the AWAC urges you to back this campaign and give it your maximum support. Please send all letters endorsing this fight to this address: wswscmb@sltnet.lk.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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