

Attend Sri Lankan estate workers action committee meeting and demand reinstatement of all victimised workers

Plantation Workers' Action Committees (Sri Lanka)

23 March 2022

Plantation Workers' Action Committees (PWAC) from the Alton, Glenugie and Abbotsleigh estates are holding a joint online meeting at 3 p.m. on Sunday, March 27 to demand the unconditional reinstatement of all sacked estate workers. A total of 54 workers have been victimised by management and sacked from the Alton, Katukelle and Welioya estates.

The meeting will discuss the escalating assault on workers' rights, including increased workloads, wage cuts, the so-called revenue-share model, and other measures to drive up productivity. These cost-cutting attacks have the blessing of President Gotabaya Rajapakse's government and are fully supported by the trade unions.

We urge workers and youth in estates and other sectors to participate in Sunday's meeting and discuss the program needed to defeat this repression and defend jobs, wages and conditions.

Plantation workers have long resisted the exploitative revenue-share system, which distributes a plot of land with 1,000 to 1,500 tea bushes to individual workers on a contract basis. Workers and their families are expected to tend the tea bushes, with some inputs provided by the company, and harvest the crop. The leaves are handed over to the company, which deducts its expenses and profit, with the balance given to the worker as his/her income. When fully implemented, workers lose their Employees Provident Fund and other hard-won rights.

The revenue share system was first imposed in 2016 at the Maha Uva and Walapane estates in Central Province, and the Tillyrie, Battalgalla and Annfield estates at Dickoya, near Hatton. Estate management, however, had to abandon or only partially apply the system because of workers' resistance.

Plantation companies started implementing revenue-

sharing in full last year, after suppressing a series of struggles by workers at estates in Alton in Up-Cot, Katukelle in Talawakelle and Welioya near Hatton. The Horana Plantation Company (HPC) has begun imposing the system at its estates in Alton, Fairlawn, Gouraville, Stockholm and Mahanilu after a brutal assault on its workers at Alton.

In February 2021, police arrested 24 workers and two youth from the Alton estate on frame up charges of physically assaulting estate managers. The witch hunt was launched after workers went on strike for 47 days to demand higher wages and oppose management harassment. The arrested workers now face a criminal court trial. Using the same bogus charges, HPC then summarily sacked 38 workers, who are now struggling to earn any income.

The Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) has aided and abetted the company and the police conspiracy with the National Union of Workers (NUW) and Democratic Workers Front (DPF) silently endorsing this repression.

All four divisions of Alton estate were brought under the revenue-share system in October. Workers were also told that they had to pluck 18 kilogram of tea leaves per day in order to receive a 1,000-rupee (about \$US4) daily wage. If this target is not met the worker is only paid 40 rupees a kilo, far less than 1,000 rupees per day.

As one female worker from Alton estate explained: "I've got land with nearly 1,500 tea bushes which has reduced my monthly wage by the half. I have to pluck and clean and do other work. Sometimes my husband, who has retired, helps me but it's still very difficult to reach our target."

Last month she only received 4,000 rupees. The allocated tea bushes were at two different locations which meant time was wasted getting to the plots, making it

difficult to achieve the daily target. The trade unions have ignored workers' complaints.

A worker from Fairlawn estate said, "Our rights are being removed by management, following introduction of the revenue-sharing system. The water supply system in our estate has completely collapsed and we have to bear the cost of its repair."

Katukelle estate is managed by Maskeliya Plantation Company. When workers began taking action against higher workloads last September they were targeted in a series of management and police attacks. Eleven workers were sacked and now face court cases.

The revenue-sharing model is backed by all the plantation unions, including the CWC, NUW, DPF, Up-Country People's Front (UPF) and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union. During the last general election CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman and NUW leader P. Digambaran actively campaigned in support this exploitative system.

Thondaman is currently a state minister in the Rajapakse government and other union leaders have held ministerial posts in previous regimes. The plantation union leaders are part of the political establishment, and the unions that they lead serve the companies and the government of the day.

Last week, the Planters' Association (PA) celebrated 30 years since the privatisation of previously state-owned estates by demanding full implementation of the revenue-share model. It claimed that 70 percent of tea production went in labour costs and had to be reduced.

PA leaders compared the production of Sri Lankan estate workers with low cost and high productivity in Kenya and South India. The new system was needed, they said, in order to compete in the world market. They also repeated claims that they were paying higher wages and providing social benefits, including decent housing, to Sri Lankan estate workers.

These claims are lies. Hundreds of thousands of tea plantation workers and their families live in overcrowded 10 x12 foot line rooms (about 3m x 3.5m) that lack rudimentary sanitary facilities. Estate schools and medical dispensaries have almost disappeared.

While several thousand families have been given new homes, these are not much different from the old line-rooms and were mainly built under foreign aid programs.

The escalating attack on plantation workers is being unleashed amid an unprecedented economic crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism with falling growth, declining foreign exchange and the danger of a default on foreign loans.

The government has responded by increasing the price of essentials. Unable to pay for basic food items and fuel, the working class and the rural masses are bearing the brunt of this crisis.

Last week, President Rajapakse announced that his government would turn to the International Monetary Fund for financial assistance, which means even deeper austerity measures.

Plantation workers, like their counterparts in other sectors, came forward in a series of struggles last year to defend wages and conditions. Sunday's action meeting will discuss the necessity for a program of struggle on the following demands:

- * The unconditional reinstatement of all sacked workers.
- * No to the revenue-share system.
- * Higher wages, linked to increases of cost of living, and a fully paid leave and pension scheme.
- * Medical benefits for all workers and high-quality medical facilities on every estate.
- * Decent, livable homes for all.

To fight for these demands, workers need to build their own action committees independent of the trade unions and their officials.

Initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, the Plantation Workers Action Committee (PWAC) has consistently fought to defend plantation workers from company, police and government attacks and exposed the betrayals of the unions.

We say workers can only achieve the above demands and win their basic rights in the fight for nationalisation of big plantation companies under the democratic control of the working class. This must part of a broader struggle for socialist policies and in unity with workers across Sri Lanka and internationally.

Plantation workers must turn to their international class brothers and sisters and join the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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