

Eighteen months after being accused, still no trial for framed-up Sri Lankan plantation workers

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Frame-up court action against militant Alton Estate workers near Maskeliya is yet to begin, depriving the workers of jobs, wages and other social rights. The victimisation began early last year, after the workers launched an industrial campaign for higher wages and improved living conditions.

On February 2, 2021, around 500 Alton Estate workers walked out to demand higher wages, and on February 5 they participated in a one-day national plantation workers' strike alongside 150,000 other of their colleagues. The Alton workers remained on strike until March 22 in protest over harassment by the estate management.

The police later arrested 22 workers and two youth on trumped-up charges, accusing them of physically harassing the manager and damaging his residence during a protest near the premises on February 17. A case was filed against these workers at the magistrate's court in Hatton.

At the same time, the Horana Plantations Company, which manages Alton Estate, summarily sacked 38 workers, without even holding an inquiry. They were falsely accused of participating in a protest with 80 unnamed workers near the manager's residence and of assaulting him. Thirty-four of these workers were given letters informing them that they were sacked, with another four verbally instructed not to attend work.

At a recent August 3 magistrate's court hearing, police requested that the case be postponed until October 12, stating that the attorney general had not yet presented a charge sheet against the accused workers. The eighteen-month delay in the filing of charges highlights the frame-up nature of the allegations, which have been manufactured by the company and the police, aided and abetted by the plantation trade unions. Plantation

management is keen to prosecute the workers for allegedly damaging the manager's residence because this would result in severe punishment.

Anyone found guilty of damaging public property can be imprisoned for between one and twenty years, and fined 1,000 rupees, or three times the value of the damage to the property, whichever is higher.

Separate Labour Court hearings on the dismissals filed by trade unions and some workers were to be held on August 3. These have been postponed until September 27 and 29.

In June, four of the sacked workers were reinstated, without even being given letters, after a ruling by the Labour Court. They were taken back, however, as new recruits and without receiving any compensation for their dismissals.

Video presented at the Labour Court on August 2 purported to show the workers attacking the estate manager's bungalow. The individuals in the images, however, are unidentifiable. Nehru Karunakaran, the lawyer appearing for the workers, said that the 38 workers accused of damaging the manager's home, cannot be seen in the video.

The 38 sacked workers and the 22 facing a court trial were targeted by Alton Estate management because they were in the forefront of the workers' fight for their rights.

Alton Estate management's vicious witch hunt was carried out with the open backing of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the silent endorsement of the National Union of Workers (NUW), the Democratic People's Front (DPF) and Up-Country People's Front (UPF).

The company's calculated attack was not just directed against Alton Estate workers. It was aimed at intimidating the entire plantation workforce, amid a broader drive to

impose greater workloads and to cut wages.

Last year, in the same manner, eleven workers were sacked by Katukelle Estate management in Talawakelle, and five workers from Welioya Estate in Hatton. These attacks were also unleashed with the silent endorsement of the CWC, the NUW, the DPF, the UPF and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union.

In the past year, Alton Estate management has cut wages and driven up workloads. Most workers at the estate are being paid a half-day wage even though they work eight hours. They must pluck at least 18 kilograms of tea leaves per day in order to get a full-day's wage.

One female worker, who is among those victimised at Alton Estate, told the WWS: "The police have still not produced a charge sheet and so the courts have postponed the case without any hearing. I have to spend 400 rupees (about \$US1) on bus fares, apart from paying a lawyers' fees, each time I attend the courts. Our trade union has refused to give us the lawyers' fees. We were victimised because we were demanding our rights against management. The trade unions are not defending us."

The plantation unions, whose only concern is company profits, fully back the harsh new work norms. In an interview last week with the News First television channel, CWC General Secretary Jeevan Thondaman said: "Plantation workers are working under a 150-year-old wage system. This must be changed, and the revenue-sharing system introduced to improve the life conditions of the people."

The CWC and the other plantations unions endorse the so-called "revenue sharing scheme." Thondaman's claim that it will "improve workers' life conditions" is a patent lie.

Under this system, a worker is assigned a plot of land from an estate to tend. The harvest is given to the company, which deducts the cost of manure and other supplies that it provides, and its profit. The worker, who must mobilise his family to assist in the cultivation, receives the remaining share. Workers also lose access to retirement schemes, such as provident funds, as well as meagre welfare facilities and other social rights. Most estates, however, have been unable to impose this scheme because of workers' resistance to its backbreaking workloads and minimal income.

Confronting an unprecedented economic crisis early this year, the former Rajapakse government began imposing harsh austerity measures on the masses. Beginning in April, this provoked a wave of mass protests, leading to general strikes, which involved plantation workers. The

demonstrations of the past six months have been the largest in Sri Lankan history.

While the mass anti-government opposition forced Gotabhaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign, President Ranil Wickremesinghe is now pushing for full implementation of an International Monetary Fund austerity program. All the plantation unions, like every other Sri Lankan trade union, support these measures.

Wickremesinghe has invited every parliamentary party to help establish an all-party government to unleash these social attacks. The CWC, whose leaders have held ministerial positions in previous administrations, was among the first to announce that it would join such a regime.

This further demonstrates that workers cannot defend their rights through the unions, which are the industrial police of the ruling elite and the profit system. That is why workers must build action committees to defend their rights. Following the initiative of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), action committees have been built in Alton and Glenugie estates. We encourage other plantation workers to establish action committees in their estates.

The SEP, the only party that has consistently campaigned to defend Alton Estate workers, urges workers and youth across the island to demand the reinstatement of the sacked plantation workers and the dropping of all court action against the framed-up Alton Estate workers. This must be advanced as part of the fight for a democratic and socialist congress of workers and the rural masses, that would lay the basis for a workers' and small farmers' government based on a socialist program.



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