

Sri Lankan plantation workers protest to demand reinstatement of sacked colleagues

Our correspondents
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On August 28, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Alton and Glenugie estate workers' action committees held a powerful demonstration and march. It demanded the reinstatement of 38 workers sacked by Alton Estate management and the withdrawal of frameup charges against 22 workers.

When Alton Estate workers went on strike to demand higher wages in February and March 2021, the police arrested 22 workers and two youth on trumped-up charges. They were accused of physically harassing the estate manager and damaging his residence during a protest near the premises on February 17. A case has been filed against these workers in the Hatton magistrate's court.

The Horana Plantations Company, which manages Alton Estate, summarily sacked 38 workers over the strike action, later reinstating just four of them, but without back pay.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) actively supported these victimisations. The other plantation unions—the National Union of Workers, the Democratic Workers Front and the Up-country People's Front—silently approved the witch hunt.

SEP members campaigned among Alton, Glenugie and Fairlawn estate workers in the lead up to last month's demonstration distributing hundreds of WSWs articles on the victimised Alton workers as well as an SEP statement calling for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and the Rural Masses.

Demonstrators, who marched almost two kilometres from Alton Estate to Upcot town, were greeted by workers from their line rooms and those working in the fields.

Following the march, protesters were addressed by Glenugie Estate action committee secretary and SEP political committee member K. Kandeepan, along with

M. Thevarajah, who is also on the SEP political committee. Their speeches were livestreamed on the SEP's Facebook page and have been viewed so far by over 1,000.

Kandeepan contrasted the trade unions' treacherous support for the victimisations with the immediate and determined action of the SEP to defend Alton Estate workers.

“By not defending these victimised workers, the trade unions have once again shown that they are acting as tools and policemen of the state and the plantation companies.

“Out of this experience several workers came forward to form an action committee to not only defend their victimised colleagues but to fight for the rights of the working class as a whole, including in the estates,” he said.

Kandeepan explained the SEP's call for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and the Rural Masses attended by delegates democratically elected from action committees.

“This is of great importance. The government and the capitalist class, with the support of the trade unions, have unleashed attacks on the rights of workers and the poor. Workers need to fight for socialist policies and for a workers' and farmers' government,” he said.

Thevarajah explained that “President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government is implementing the IMF's brutal austerity measures. His regime is planning to destroy hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, slash wages and other rights won by workers in past struggles. Workers cannot tolerate these attacks.”

Thevarajah referred to the mass support for the general strikes on April 28 and May 6 against the previous government of then President Gotabhaya

Rajapakse. While Rajapakse was forced to flee the country, the betrayals of the trade unions and pseudo-left parties meant that Wickremesinghe, a stooge of the banks and of American imperialism, was able to come to power and is now intensifying the attacks on social and democratic rights.

“All over the world workers are facing the same situation, from advanced countries like the US and Great Britain to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Everywhere, workers are fighting to defend their rights.

“In the US, Will Lehman is fighting for the United Auto Workers international presidency, exposing the corrupt and reactionary bureaucracy. He campaign, supported by the US SEP, is fighting not to reform this tool of the corporations but to smash it and build independent workers’ power through the building of rank-and-file committees.”

The speaker called for workers to reject Wickremesinghe’s maneuvers to establish an all-party government and to build action committees at every estate, independent of the trade unions and the capitalist parties. “Workers and youth must decide to join the SEP to lead this struggle,” Thevarajah said.

After the meeting, Rajah, a local leader of the CWC branch at Suriyakanda Estate, attempted to initiate a provocation against SEP members. He claimed that a Tamil version of a WSWS article, which sharply criticised CWC general Jeevan Thondaman, had contained lies but was unable to substantiate this claim. Thondaman was a former state minister in Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government.

The article, “Eighteen months after being accused, still no trial for framed-up Sri Lankan plantation workers,” explained the role played by the CWC and other unions in the frameup of Alton Estate workers. It also referred to Thondaman’s support for the revenue-sharing system, which he claimed would “improve the life conditions of the people.” The local CWC leader was unable to win any support and retreated when the SEP members outlined the union’s record.

Speaking with the WSWS, a victimised worker said: “We are facing severe difficulties without jobs. The current skyrocketing cost of living means that it is very difficult to live. We go to other estates looking for casual work, which pays only a very meagre wage. We go early in the morning and return at night. This is the

only way we can provide for our children. Workers must support us to win back our jobs and for the withdrawal of the legal cases.”

The husband of another sacked worker spoke to the WSWS after he saw the CWC local leader arguing with SEP members.

He said: “I know this person very well. I told him, ‘They [the SEP] are the people who, from the very first week, came to our estate and campaigned for the reinstatement of the sacked workers. You should do everything to defend the workers, but you did nothing. One of your CWC leaders Barath Arulsamy directly supported the Alton Estate manager.’ I warned him not to disturb SEP members and told him we defend them.”

R. Gopiraj, from Fairlawn Estate, said: “I saw your protest in support of the Alton workers through Facebook and I shared it with several of my friends. The trade unions are doing nothing to defend the Alton victims or any other plantation workers. Your party is doing a great job.”

Gopiraj had seen the WSWS and had read the SEP statement calling for a “Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural masses.”

The plantation workers are “leaderless,” he said, adding: “The CWC, the NUW and all the trade unions support estate management and the plantation companies. They do not fight for worker’s rights.

“I previously thought workers needed to establish honest trade unions to work for workers, but after discussion with you, I understand how the trade unions have been transformed into direct tools of management,” he said, before pledging to help form an action committee.



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