

Withdraw frame-up cases against Sri Lankan estate workers! Unconditional reinstatement of all suspended workers!

Plantation Action Committee in Sri Lanka
5 February 2023

The Plantation Action Committee in Sri Lanka (PACSL) appeals to workers in Sri Lanka and internationally to join our struggle to defeat the ongoing witch hunt of plantation workers at the Alton, Velioya and Katukelle estates victimised for fighting for better wages and working conditions. We demand the withdrawal of the frame-up court cases and the immediate and unconditional reinstatement of all sacked employees at these estates.

* On February 5, 2021, about 500 Alton estate workers participated in a one-day national strike of plantation workers demanding a 1,000-rupee (\$US2.75) daily wage. The Alton workers, however, continued their walkout for another 47 days in protest against the estate management's provocations. When workers demonstrated outside the manager's bungalow on February 17, they were falsely accused of assault and damaging property. The accused workers have denied all charges.

Twenty-eight workers were sacked at the Alton estate at Up-Cot in Maskeliya on April 21, 2021, and a court case filed against 22 of them on the bogus charges. The 22 were accused of physically assaulting estate manager Sathyamoorthy Subash Narayanan and assistant manager Anushan Thiruchelvamand, damaging the manager's residence. The Alton estate is owned by Horana Plantation Company.

Their court case has been repeatedly postponed because the police have been unable to submit any of the charges. Every time these workers are ordered to appear in court, the police say that the attorney general has not sent the charge sheets. The last hearing on January 11 was also postponed until March 15.

* In June 2021, ten workers from the Velioya estate in Hatton, which is operated by the Hatton Plantation Company, were sacked by management. These ten

workers, as well as a schoolteacher, a bus conductor from state-owned Ceylon Transport Board, and a samurdhi (government welfare) worker living in the same estate, face a court trial.

Their "crimes" were to demand food relief during the COVID-19 lock-down and for demonstrating outside the estate office. The workers have been charged with damaging the estate tea factory and threatening officers, allegations that they completely deny. While five of the 10 estate workers were later reinstated, the court action against all these workers is still pending. The last hearing—due on December 21 last year—was postponed after the court was told that the estate manager who filed the case had gone overseas.

* On September 29, 2021, Katukelle estate workers struck in protest against management's victimisation of P. Ponnirselvi, a female worker, and demonstrated near the estate's tea factory. After an altercation between workers and estate officials, the police arrested 11 workers who were later released on harsh bail conditions and the court case filed.

These workers were in the forefront of the fight against increasing workloads and for a 1,000-rupee daily wage. Almost one year has passed but no charge sheet has been produced by the Talawakelle police. The last hearing, which was supposed to be on December 27, has been postponed until February 7.

This witch-hunting is a part of broader attack, not just on estate employees but on the wages, working conditions and democratic rights of the entire working class.

The tea industry in Sri Lanka has plunged into crisis due to falling demand and rising competition on the world markets from other tea-producing countries, such as Kenya, China and India. Tea exports have also been impacted by the US-NATO war against Russia. Sri

Lankan exporters confront problems sending tea to Russia, one of its main markets, because of US sanctions against that country.

Plantation companies are ruthlessly attempting to impose this crisis on estate workers by cutting wages and driving up workloads. They are also imposing productivity-based revenue sharing systems which destroy workers' social benefits, including the hard-won pension funds, and transform them into tenant farmers.

Estate workers have repeatedly fought for a 1,000-rupee daily wage since 2016 and opposed plantation productivity increases. The companies have rejected workers' demands while reaping huge profits.

Successive governments, including the current Wickremesinghe administration, have given their blessings to the plantation companies, backing their repressive actions, low wages and higher workloads.

Role of the estate trade unions

The witch-hunting of Alton, Velioya and Katukelle workers has been endorsed by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the National Union of Workers (NUW) and the Up-Country People's Front. These, and all the other plantation trade unions, have rejected any fight to defend these workers.

Instead, they have collaborated with management and police in the witch hunt of the workers. Alton is a case in point. CWC local leaders provided the company and the police with a list of workers to be arrested. Some of the accused were even told by the union to surrender to the police.

The plantation unions have systematically worked with the companies to increase workloads, cut wages and impose productivity-based revenue share systems. They have betrayed every struggle by estate workers, including national strikes involving hundreds of thousands in 2016, 2018 and 2021. Allied with the ruling and opposition parties, these unions function as industrial police for the plantation companies and the government.

As a result of these bitter experiences, we have realised that estate workers cannot defend their social and democratic rights through these organisations. That is why we took initiative to form our own action committee, independent of the unions, to fight for our rights.

We are not responsible for the economic predicament of the tea industry, which is a product of the crisis of capitalism. Having toiled for generations while facing social misery, we are the real producers of the massive profits accumulated by the tea companies. Our living conditions have deteriorated even further as a result of the

austerity measures being implemented by the current Wickremesinghe government on the orders of the International Monetary Fund.

Most of us still live in small line-rooms built during the British Colonial era which lack basic amenities, such as drinking water, lavatories and proper educational facilities for our children.

The PACSL has decided to launch a vigorous campaign to defend our colleagues at Alton, Velioya and Katukelle as part of the fight to secure plantation workers' rights.

Our campaign for withdrawal of all the frame-up charges and the immediate reinstatement of all sacked workers is inseparably connected to the defence of the democratic rights of the working class as a whole.

We appeal to all workers to build this defence campaign by sending letters and emails to the address below demanding the reinstatement of all those victimised and the withdrawal of all police charges.

Please send copies of your letters and emails to the PACSL and contact us to take forward this fight. We plan to hold major meetings in the plantations and other parts of Sri Lanka to build support for this campaign.

Attorney General

Mr. Sanjay Rajaratnam

No. 159 , Hulftsdorp, Colombo 12.

Email: administration@attorneygeneral.gov.lk

Secretary, Ministry of Public Security

Mr. P.V. Gunatillake

Email: civilsecurity@defence.lk

Inspector General of Police

Mr. C. D. Wickramaratne

Email: telligp@police.lk

Send copies to the SLPAC:

Email: plantationacsl@gmail.com



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact