

Frame-up case against Alton Estate workers in Sri Lanka enters third year

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On March 15, the case against 22 Alton Estate workers and two youth in Upcot was postponed by a Hatton magistrate court until June 2. Sri Lanka's attorney-general has still failed to produce any charges.

The endless postponement of this case, and the failure of the police and the attorney-general to lay charges against the persecuted workers, confirms the Socialist Equality Party and the Alton Estate Workers Action Committee's insistence that this is a frame-up.

Some 500 Alton Estate workers began a work stoppage on February 2, 2021, to demand a 1,000-rupee (\$US3.13) daily wage. On February 5 they joined national strike action called by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), involving hundreds of thousands of estate workers over the same demands.

The Alton Estate workers remained on strike until March 26 in protest against management harassment and provocations. Twenty-two workers and two youth were arrested after management falsely accused them of physically assaulting the estate manager and assistant manager and damaging the manager's house during a protest on February 17.

Thirty-four workers, including the 22 arrested, were summarily sacked by the Horana Plantation Company, which controls Alton Estate, without any investigation into the accusations. The CWC participated in this witch hunt, providing the names of the workers allegedly involved.

While the frame-up case has been repeatedly postponed, the workers have had to attend the magistrate court in Hatton, 20 kilometres away, on all these occasions. That has cost each worker 340 rupees for the bus fare and 1,500 rupees for lawyer fees. The Horana Plantation Company has hired four or five lawyers from Colombo, determined to further punish the workers by lavishly spending on the case.

These poverty-stricken workers are also required to travel to Hatton for a labour court hearing over the case. The last scheduled labour court hearing, on March 21, was postponed until June 26.

As one victimised female worker told the WSW: "We are facing severe difficulties because of this case. I've been compelled to get casual work at another estate and must travel nearly four kilometres. We leave home at 7.30 a.m. and return at 6 p.m., which makes it very difficult to look after the children. Even if you're paid 1,000 rupees per day it's not enough for our food, so how are we supposed to pay for the court cases.

"I'm a member of the NUW [National Union of Workers], which previously promised to pay the lawyer's fees for its members but now refuses to do so. When the CWC called the national strike, we participated. We are now victimised and all these unions have abandoned us," she said.

While the estates have been leased to 22 regional companies, they remain government property. Police allege that the strikers damaged the manager's residence, which is public property, and an unbailable offence in Sri Lanka. This means that if police proved their allegations, the workers would face severe punishment, including fines and imprisonment.

While the CWC openly backed this witch hunt, the other plantation unions, including the NUW, the Up-Country People's Front and the Democratic Workers Congress, tacitly supported the frame-up, refusing to organise any struggle to defend the victimised workers.

The persecution of the Alton Estate workers is a part of a broader assault against all estate workers and their rising opposition to low wages, increased workloads and the rising cost of living.

In June 2021, five workers of Velioya Estate in Hatton were arrested after protesting for government-

allocated food relief during a COVID-19 lockdown. The Velioya Estate workers were not provided with any food relief. Ten workers, as well as a schoolteacher, a Ceylon Transport Board bus conductor and a samurdhi (government welfare) worker, all living in the same estate, face a trial over their protest.

On September 29, 2021, Katukelle Estate workers struck in protest against the victimisation of P. Ponnirselvi, a female worker. They demonstrated near the estate's tea factory. After an altercation between strikers and estate officials, the police arrested 11 workers. They were released on harsh bail conditions and face a court trial.

The plantation trade unions, which also function as political parties, are aligned with Sri Lanka's capitalist parties. Their leaders are given ministerial posts, enjoying perks and privileges for their service to the state. Exploiting workers votes during elections, these organisations support and impose government policies attacking their members' social and democratic rights.

These unions all support the International Monetary Fund austerity measures being implemented by the regime of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, drastically impacting on workers living conditions. They also back estate management demands for higher productivity and wage cuts.

Addressing parliament on March 10, CWC leader Jeevan Thondaman, who is Wickremesinghe's infrastructure minister, denounced workers taking action against the government's social attacks. "These struggles," he declared, "should not be allowed because they are a conspiracy to overthrow the government."

Alton Estate workers, with Socialist Equality Party support, have established an action committee independent of the trade union bureaucracy. They have initiated a campaign to demand an end to the ongoing persecution of those who were arrested and for the immediate reinstatement of all sacked workers.

As a statement issued by the Plantation Workers Action Committee on February 6 declared:

"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..."

"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.

"Our campaign for the 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 (Plantation Action Committee of Sri Lanka) 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."

We urge workers, youth, students and others to support this fight. Letters can be sent to:

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