

Oppose attempt to disrupt defence for witch-hunted Sri Lankan plantation workers

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Last Sunday the management of the Alton Estate at Up-Cot in Maskeliya, in the central plantation district of Sri Lanka, made a failed attempt to disrupt the petition campaign carried out by the Plantation Workers' Action Committee (PWAC) for the defence of the estate's witch-hunted workers.

The petition, addressed to the attorney general, demands the immediate withdrawal of the trumped-up charges against 22 workers and two youth in the estate, which is managed by the Hayleys Group's Horana plantation company.

The PWAC has launched a campaign, with the support of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), to mobilise the support of workers in Sri Lanka and elsewhere to defeat the charges against these workers. As part of the campaign, an online petition has been launched and printed copies are being circulated among workers to collect their signatures. The campaign is winning enthusiastic support from workers in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Last Sunday, while several members of the PWAC and the SEP were collecting signatures from Alton Estate workers, they were approached by Sandanan Sanmuganadan, who works in the estate dispensary and has a close relationship with management. He held a copy of a recent WSWS article on the Alton witch hunt, which had been distributed among workers.

Sanmuganadan said the estate management and the police "blamed" him for allowing the campaign. "The management said that the petition campaign affects the company's tea sales in the international tea market and it will affect the workers also severely. So, we are facing troubles. Therefore, I request you to stop your campaign in the estate," he said.

Sanmuganadan claimed there were lies in the article, but when challenged by PWAC/SEP campaigners he failed to point out anything. PWAC/SEP members refused to heed his threatening "request" to stop and continued their campaign.

Sanmuganadan's remarks that the campaign affects the company's tea sales and the workers were aimed at intimidating workers. But his attempt failed. More than 25 workers signed the petition in support of the PWAC/SEP campaign.

Sanmuganadan is an agent of the estate management and the police, providing them with information regarding the activities

of workers, the PWAC and the SEP in the estate.

After PWAC and SEP members returned from the Alton Estate, Sanmuganadan visited the house of the mother-in-law of A. Parimaladevi, a PWAC member and a SEP candidate for Maskeliya Pradeseya Sabha in the local government elections, which were to be held last March but were postponed indefinitely by the government.

Accompanied by four other individuals, Sanmuganadan warned residents not to participate in SEP meetings and other activities.

When SEP member K. Kandeepan asked about the visit, Sanmuganadan denied it, but admitted that he was a member of a police vigilante committee in the Alton Estate and that police officials come to meet him frequently.

The PWAC and SEP warn workers at the Alton Estate that they must beware of this management-police agent. We call on them to take steps to form their own action committees to fight the management-government attacks and to organise their defence against vigilante committees.

At the same time, we emphasise that the PWAC and SEP are not intimidated by these agents. We will continue and strengthen the defence campaign for the witch-hunted workers and the struggle to defend the social and democratic rights of plantation workers.

The day after these incidents, a police officer from the criminal investigation division of the Maskeliya police called on this writer, asking whether I visited the Alton Estate and whether the SEP was going to hold a meeting there. When asked why he was inquiring and how he knew about visits to the Alton Estate, the officer said he knew from police patrolling the estate.

After the Alton workers' wage struggle in February-March 2021 demanding a 1,000-rupee (\$US3.40) daily wage, police patrolling of the estate has intensified to gather information on workers' activities.

The witch hunt against the Alton Estate workers is a combined conspiracy of the Horana plantation company, the police and the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation trade union.

Some 500 Alton Estate workers commenced a strike on February 2, 2021, demanding a 1,000-rupee daily wage. They

joined hundreds of thousands of plantation workers in a national strike called by the CWC on February 5 over the same demand.

The Alton Estate workers continued the strike until March 26 in protest against management harassment and provocations. Twenty-two workers and two youth were arrested on bogus charges that they had physically assaulted the estate manager and assistant manager and damaged the manager's house during a protest on February 17.

Without any investigation, 34 workers, including the 22 arrested, were sacked. The CWC collaborated in this witch hunt, providing the names of the workers allegedly involved in the February 17 incident. Later, the arrested workers were bailed out on harsh conditions and the court case has dragged on for more than two years. However, the attorney general's department and the police have failed to produce any charges against the accused workers in the Hatton magistrate's court. The next hearing is scheduled for June 21.

The SEP and PWAC alone are fighting continuously to defend these workers, demanding their unconditional reinstatement with due compensation for the suffering they have gone through for more than two years.

The witch hunt against the Alton Estate workers is part of a broader attack on plantation workers and the working class as a whole.

In June 2021, five workers at the Velioya Estate in Hatton were arrested after a protest demanding government-allocated food relief during a COVID-19 lockdown.

On September 29, 2021, police arrested 11 workers at the Katukelle Estate who struck in protest against the victimisation of P. Ponnirselvi, a female worker, by the estate management. All the plantation unions, including the CWC, National Union of Workers and Up Country People Front, have refused to defend these workers.

On March 29 this year, the Wickremesinghe government deployed thousands of armed soldiers and police to break strike action by Ceylon Petroleum Cooperation (CPC) workers against privatisation, and 20 workers, including union leaders, were placed on compulsory leave. This witch hunt also continues.

Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekera has ordered a police investigation into taking legal action against the workers under essential services regulations, which ban industrial action in several public sector enterprises. None of the unions, including those functioning in the CPC and the plantations, have taken any action against these repressive moves against petroleum workers.

Amid increasing government repression, the regional plantation companies have intensified their attacks on estate workers. Daily targets for plucking tea leaves have been increased to unbearable levels—from 18 to 20 kilograms or from 16 to 18 kilograms. If workers are unable to reach the target, they lose half their daily wage.

At the same time, regional plantation companies have stepped up the introduction of a productivity-based revenue share system. Workers are allocated plots of land with about 1,500 tea bushes. They are responsible for maintaining and harvesting the bushes while the company supplies fertiliser and agrochemicals. Workers are paid after deducting the cost of those inputs and a share for the company. A workers' whole family has to shed sweat and blood in this system, for the profits of the companies.

Under the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity program, the Wickremesinghe government has decided to restructure 430 state enterprises, including 21 regional plantation companies. This will heavily impact on more than 600,000 workers, including some 150,000 estate workers and their families. The estate workers are one of the most oppressed and lowest-paid sections of the working class. They will face more attacks under the estate restructuring, including job losses, wage cuts and more brutal working conditions.

To fight these attacks, workers need grassroot organisations, i.e., their own action committees, independent from the trade union bureaucracy, to unify with their class brothers and sisters elsewhere in the country and internationally who face similar attacks.

At the same time, the PWAC and the SEP appeal to workers in Sri Lanka and internationally to support the campaign to defend the witch-hunted Alton workers by signing the PWAC online petition and sending your protest statements to the relevant authorities in Sri Lanka:

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