

Sri Lanka: Management, union and police seek to stop SEP/Plantation Workers' Action Committee defence campaign

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Plantation Workers' Action Committee (PWAC) in Sri Lanka have received reliable information that Alton Estate management is conspiring with local Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leaders to stop the PWAC/SEP campaign to defend the 22 victimised workers and two youth.

The SEP has been told that management convened a meeting with its local stooges and trade union officials in early June. The estate bosses told those in attendance that the PWAC/SEP work would disrupt the company's tea sales on the world market and that this could badly impact on workers. Estate management sought support from the participants to block the campaign.

Management's intervention is in response to a PWAC petition launched on May 30 with the support of the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site*. Directed to the Sri Lankan attorney general, it demands the withdrawal of trumped-up charges and reinstatement of 34 Alton workers, including those facing court, who were sacked by the Horana Plantation Company which controls the estate.

Several recent incidents indicate that the police are supporting the joint management and union attempts to block the petition campaign.

* On June 4, Sandanan Palaniyandi, also known as Shanmuganadan, who works in the estate dispensary, attempted to disrupt a June 4 petition campaign by PWAC-SEP members. He introduced himself as a member of an Alton Estate police vigilante committee and claimed that estate management and the police had "blamed" him for allowing the petition campaign to proceed.

* On June 20, Pittchamuttu, a CWC Maskeliya area leader and T. Thanaraj, a CWC Alton Estate branch leader, met SEP member K. Kandipan in the Glenugie Estate where he lives and denounced him for criticising CWC activities and other unions.

* On June 22, Pittchamuttu visited the home of one of the female workers facing bogus court action and warned her

not to participate in any PWAC discussions. The previous evening, and following a court hearing, she and nine other victimised workers attended an action committee discussion and agreed to strengthen its campaign.

* On June 25, SEP members—K. Kandipan and M. Thevarajah—were told by M. Shanthakumar, a CWC trade union branch official not to meet with PWAC members at the Alton Estate and not to criticise the trade unions. Shanthakumar's warnings were issued after they had visited the estate.

* On June 30, Maskeliya police summoned Kandipan about a complaint made by Sandanan Palaniyandi also known as Shanmuganadan. He falsely alleged that Kandipan had pasted up a poster in the estate abusing him. Contrary to his claim, Kandipan had posted a June 12 *World Socialist Web Site* statement entitled, "Oppose attempt to disrupt defence for witch-hunted Sri Lankan plantation workers."

During the police inquiry, Kandipan and Thevarajah confronted Palaniyandi over his claims. He admitted that his complaint against Kandipan was incorrect and said he would not ask police to take any action.

The SEP will not be daunted. It insists: Hands off PWAC and our fight to defend these employees witch-hunted by the company! At the same time, we urge workers and youth in other plantations and workplaces to support our petition for the withdrawal of the frame-up court action and for the reinstatement of all workers.

The joint efforts of estate management, the unions and the police to undermine our campaign is in response to the enthusiastic support it is winning from workers in Sri Lanka and internationally. Published online and in printed format, the petition is being endorsed by workers in key industry sectors, such as the ports, Telecom and the railways, and students in the universities.

The 22 workers and two youth from Alton Estate were

arrested by police after management falsely accused them of assaulting the estate manager and assistant manager and damaging the manager's house during a protest on February 17, 2021. They were later released under harsh bail conditions.

The CWC participated in this witch hunt, providing the police with the names of the workers allegedly involved. The National Workers Union and the Up-country People's Front, the two other trade unions in the estate, have not raised a finger against this blatant victimisation.

The February 17 protest was part of a work stoppage by some 500 Alton Estate workers which began two weeks earlier on February 2. They were demanding a 1,000-rupee (\$US3.13) daily wage. On February 5 they joined national strike action called by the CWC, involving hundreds of thousands of estate workers over the same demand.

Determined to punish the striking workers, the Horana Plantation Company summarily sacked 34 workers on April 21, 2021, without any investigation into the accusations.

Following these sackings, the police filed a court case at Hatton Magistrate's Court against the arrested 24. The case has been constantly postponed and three years later, has still not been heard. Last listed for June 21, it was postponed yet again until September 20.

In response, the SEP campaign has intensified its campaign to defend these victimised workers. Several party statements and many articles have been published on the *World Socialist Web Site* explaining the political meaning of this attack and the sordid role of trade unions as industrial police for the government and the companies.

The plantation companies and the trade unions are acutely nervous about the support being won by the PWAC and SEP from broader layers of plantation workers.

The SEP opposes the increased workloads demanded by the plantation companies and is conducting a fight for decent wages and an improved pension system, housing, health and education facilities. The PWAC has also defended Velioya and Katukelle estate workers whose struggles in 2021 were suppressed by these companies and who sacked dozens of workers.

The escalating witch-hunt against Alton Estate workers is a warning to all Sri Lankan workers and part of the savage attacks by government and big business on their wages, living conditions, jobs and basic democratic rights.

The plantation companies, the Wickremesinghe government and the trade unions are acutely aware that estate workers joined the mass movement in April and July last year that brought down the President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government.

They also know that this growing radicalisation will increase in line with growing opposition to the privatisation

or restructuring of plantations and other state-owned enterprises as demanded by the International Monetary Fund. While Sri Lankan plantations are held by big business under 99-year leases, it appears that the government is seeking to sell the estates.

On June 20, the *Daily News* reported that State Minister of Plantation Industries Lohan Ratwatte declared that steps would be taken to stop violence in some of the estates and maintain law and order. Tough disciplinary action would be taken against offenders, he said.

The witch-hunting of plantation workers is in line with similar repression in other industry sectors. In revenge for a strike by Ceylon Petroleum Corporation workers against privatisation in March, 20 union leaders and its activists have been interdicted. The government responded to anti-privatisation strikes and protests by Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation workers by issuing warning letters to fifty employees and imposing forced transfers on two union officials.

The PWAC/SEP will intensify its defence campaign of all witch-hunted workers and against all of Wickremesinghe government's anti-democratic measures. The SEP urges all estate workers and workplaces in every other sector to form their own action committees, independent of trade unions, to fight to defend their jobs, wages and working conditions against the government's IMF-dictated austerity policies and employers' attacks. The SEP's perspective is based on socialist policies and the mobilisation of the working class for a workers' and peasants' government as part of the struggle for socialist internationalism.

We urge workers and youth to attend our public meeting this week on July 6 to discuss these vital political questions. Entitled "Oppose the Sri Lankan government's privatisation of state enterprises! Build workers' action committees to fight for jobs and wages!" the meeting will be held at Public Library Auditorium in Colombo.



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