

Campaign to defend victimised Sri Lankan estate workers wins significant support

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The Sri Lankan Plantation Workers Action Committee's petition campaign to demand the attorney general withdraw frame-up court cases against 22 workers and two youths from Alton Estate in Maskeliya has won important responses in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Up to 15th July, over 500 workers have signed the online and written petitions. These include estate, harbour, bank, railway, health, free trade zone, hotel, cinnamon and fishing workers, as well as youth and university students.

In April 2021, the police filed cases against the Alton Estate workers in the magistrate's court at Hatton, following false allegations by the Alton Estate manager that he had been physically assaulted and his house damaged. The manager made the false complaint after workers protested outside his house on February 17 over his continued harassment of striking employees.

These cases have dragged on without being heard for nearly two and a half years on the pretext that the attorney general has not yet formulated the charges. On June 21 this year the case was postponed yet again to September 20.

The Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union, provided the police with the names of the protesting workers who were later arrested and eventually released under harsh bail conditions. The Horana Plantation Company, which controls the Alton Estate, immediately sacked 34 workers on the same false accusations without holding any investigation into the allegations.

Other Sri Lankan plantation unions, including the Democratic Workers Front, Up-country People's Front and National Union of Workers, have remained silent about this blatant victimisation, tacitly supporting it.

The management and police repression at Alton Estate is part of a broader attack by the plantation companies to suppress the rising opposition among estate workers to their below-poverty wages, degrading social and living conditions and backbreaking workloads.

In 2021, 11 workers were victimised and dismissed at Katukelle Estate at Talawakelle, and five workers sacked

from Velioya Estate near Hatton. The police have filed cases against these workers.

The Socialist Equality Party and the Sri Lankan Plantation Workers Action Committee have campaigned continuously to mobilise workers against this repression. The petition condemns the Alton Estate witch-hunt while demanding all their cases be immediately withdrawn and all sacked workers reinstated unconditionally.

We urge workers and youth internationally to support this campaign by signing the petition and sending letters and emails to the attorney general, with copies to us. It is part of the broader struggle to defend democratic rights.

We publish below some of comments made by supporters of the campaign and international letters we have received.

A retired railway worker said: "The wage struggle of the estate workers was reasonable because they do not get a living income. The government had previously said it would offer a fair wage hike. The plantation workers started their struggle because they had not received the increase. By unleashing repression, the employers and the government are trying to intimidate [the estate workers]."

He referred to bourgeois media's failure to report this witch-hunt, adding, "I only found about this repressive situation [only] from you and the *World Socialist Web Site*."

Railway workers were facing the same problems regarding their social rights, he continued. "The government has cut the salary increments we used to be paid and it has impacted on our pension. We are unable to cope with the rising cost of living. The unions in the railways are no different from their counterparts in estates. They don't fight to defend our rights."

S. Mullaithivyan, who works for a non-government organisation in Jaffna, said: "I support this campaign and am signing this petition requesting that the cases against those workers be withdrawn and that they be given their jobs back. Estate workers have been a suffering community for a long time and the problems they face must be ended. Your fight to defend their rights is highly appreciated."

A. Yalini, a female student at Jaffna University, said, “I also come from an estate area and although there are many trade unions and political parties, the workers are still suffering. We cannot allow these fake cases being used against workers. I request that these cases be withdrawn immediately, and the sacked workers be unconditionally reinstated.”

On June 24, a meeting organised by the Health Workers Action Committee at the Kandy National Hospital unanimously passed a resolution supporting the petition campaign for the Alton Estate workers.

It stated: “We condemn the witch-hunt against the Alton Estate workers. The police and attorney general have been unable to present any reliable charges against those workers who have suffering immensely for over two years. This meeting demands the immediate withdrawal of all the cases against them and that all suspended workers be immediately reinstated.”

The Plantation Workers Action Committee has also received copies of letters sent by World Socialist Web Site readers.

A New York City education worker sent the following letter to the Sri Lankan attorney general, the inspector general of police, and the secretary of the public security ministry.

Sir: I am writing from New York City in support of the call that has been made by the Sri Lanka Plantation Action Committee for the immediate withdrawal of all police charges and the unconditional reinstatement of all those victimized after having been driven to protest or strike simply for liveable wages, better working conditions, and even just demanding food relief.

This petition cannot be considered an intrusion into a domestic Sri Lankan matter because not only are the welfare of those who produce the tea for myself and the international consumers of the tea trade of human concern around the world, but the protection of the rights of the international working class is of the utmost importance to all workers. I am an education worker who has taught global history and am very aware, as are an ever-increasing number of workers in the world, that the impacts of attacks on workers in one area are now quickly spread and replicated elsewhere in the indifferent competition for profits under capitalism.

The abuses have taken place against workers at Alton estate at Up-cot in Makeliya, the Velioya estate in Hatton, and the Katukelle estate. The charges have the character of a witch-hunt against workers who merely seek the well-being of their families and themselves, while charges sheets have not been sent, or charges not even made, or court appearance dates postponed, denying the right to swift judicial procedures. Moreover, these persecutions are clearly part of

the attempt to impose the burden of the general economic crisis on the backs of workers by inflation, wage cutting, cutting social benefits, and driving up workloads to increase productivity, which have forced general strikes and indeed a challenge to all the parliamentary parties that are acting to impose anti-worker measures of the International Monetary Fund.

Workers are not responsible for the predicament of the tea industry or the capitalist crisis in Sri Lanka and globally. Justice demands the withdrawal of what are to the eyes of the world manifestly frame-up charges, the reinstatement of all sacked workers, and the defense of the democratic rights of workers. Thank you.

Another letter was sent by a worker from the Philippines. It said:

“I am a worker in the Philippines. I strongly support and join the demand that the frame-up cases against the estate workers and their supporters in Alton, Velioya and Katukelle be stopped and dropped forthwith. The cases have been lodged against workers and their supporters who are correctly demanding better pay and working conditions, not only for themselves but for all the workers in the estates.

You might think that these workers are isolated. They are not. Their struggle is the struggle of workers in the Philippines and in all other countries too. Workers here know and are watching what is happening in Sri Lanka. We feel the pain and suffering of the working class in Sri Lanka. We are inspired by their courage and their principled stand.

Regards, Dante Pastrana

To support this campaign please sign the petition and send letters to the following authorities, with copies to the Sri Lankan Plantation Workers Action Committee.

* Sanjay Rajaratnam, Attorney General
No. 159, Hulftsdorp, Colombo 12
Email: administration@attorneygeneral.gov.lk

* P.V. Gunatillake Secretary, Ministry of Public Security
Email: civilsecurity@defence.lk

* C. D. Wickramaratne, Inspector General of Police
Email: telligp@police

Sri Lankan Plantation Workers Action Committee
Email: plantationacsl@gmail.com



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wsws.org/contact