

Four years on: Alton Estate workers in Sri Lanka face ongoing repression

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The vicious four-year-old witch-hunt against Alton Estate workers by plantation management and the police, aided and abetted by the plantation trade unions, including the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), continues.

Between February 17 and March 22 in 2021, 22 workers and two youth from Alton Estate were arrested on false charges, and 38 workers—including those arrested—were summarily sacked by the Horana Plantation Company (HPC), which manages the Alton Estate in Maskeliya. Those arrested were accused of physically attacking the estate manager Sathyamoorthy Subash Narayanan and assistant manager Anushan Thiruchelvam, allegations consistently and vehemently denied by the workers.

While the allegations against the two youth were eventually dropped, the legal persecution of the 22 workers is ongoing, with workers forced to appear every three months at a magistrate court in Hatton, about 11 kilometres from Maskeliya. No charges have been laid against these workers, who have now been directed to appear in court on May 28. All 38 workers sacked by the company are still struggling to survive without a permanent job.

The victimisation of the Alton Estate workers occurred during mass strike action by plantation workers in early 2021. Around 500 Alton Estate workers walked out on February 2 and joined a CWC-initiated national strike on February 5, involving tens of thousands of plantation workers demanding their daily wage to be increased to 1,000 rupees (\$US5).

Confronting a series of deliberate provocations from management, the Alton Estate workers remained on strike until March 18. Isolated by the CWC and other plantation unions, a group of estate workers protested outside the manager's residence on February 17 in opposition to harassment. Management immediately seized on the protest to concoct a bogus story that the workers had physically harmed the estate officials.

On January 9 this year, a Hatton Labour Tribunal judge dismissed a case lodged against HPC by 13 of the 38 sacked workers, who demanded they be reinstated with back wages. The Labour Tribunal judge not only dismissed the case but ordered each of the 13 workers to pay 7,500 rupees (\$US25) to the company for its legal expenses.

The judge claimed their case was baseless, accepting allegations by HPC lawyers that the workers were dismissed following alleged violence against estate managers. Company lawyers claimed that the workers entered the estate manager's residence on February 17, 2021, physically harmed him and the assistant manager, and

vandalised company property.

The judge accepted these bogus claims, even though the criminal case against workers at Hatton Magistrate Court is still pending and police have yet to formulate a single charge. Last December, in fact, Sri Lanka's attorney-general, the country's chief law officer, told Hatton police there was insufficient evidence to charge the workers with damaging the manager's residence.

CWC Labour Director T.F. Kathirvelu, who appeared for the 13 workers at the Labour Tribunal, later declared that the judge's ruling was "unprecedented" and "against workers." Under Sri Lankan law, a Labour Tribunal ruling can be challenged if an appeal is lodged in a higher court within 30 days. CWC officials, however, have refused to make this appeal.

Instead, Kathirvelu told some workers that they could get their jobs back if they followed the tribunal judge's directive and each pay 7,500 rupees to the company. In other words, the union, in line with the state and the company, is directing the victimised workers to admit their guilt for an offence they did not commit.

Seventeen other sacked workers have hired a lawyer and separately filed their own case for reinstatement at the same tribunal. This ruling is due next month.

The dismissal of the Alton Estate case by the Labour Tribunal again highlights the treachery of the CWC bureaucracy and other plantation trade unions.

From the outset, the CWC leadership refused to defend workers from the management's accusations. There is reliable information that when police began looking for "suspects," local CWC leaders provided police with a list of workers. CWC officials also instructed some workers to surrender to the police, claiming that this would stop future harassment.

Horana Plantations is owned by the Hayley's Group, a highly profitable conglomerate in Sri Lanka. Its actions in Alton Estate were a well-planned repressive operation, not just against workers at one estate but to teach a lesson to increasingly militant plantation workers throughout the country.

The incident occurred as part of a series of drawn-out strikes and protests which began in late 2019 by up to 150,000 plantation workers demanding a 1,000-rupee daily wage. The estate companies vehemently opposed this demand, claiming this would reduce the industry's competitiveness on the global market.

Plantation bosses demanded that their workers accept "revenue-share schemes." This involved workers and their families being assigned around 1,000 tea bushes, which they would cultivate,

while selling the harvest back to the estate, minus the annual cost of tools and other goods supplied by management. This deeply exploitative system would not only eliminate the wage system in the estates, but abolish existing pensions and other basic rights, making these toilers modern-day rentiers.

HPC management was so determined to crush the rising militancy of their workers that the planters' association organised a demonstration in Hatton on March 3, 2021, to promote their bogus claims of workers' violence. Around 500 planters demonstrated, demanding police patrols on the estates and calling for guns and weapons-training to deal with "estate violence."

On March 9, the country's National Security Council headed by then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse discussed "security issues" in the estates. It is not clear what was decided, but it demonstrated the government's clear support for the plantation companies.

CWC leaders and other plantation trade union bureaucrats have consistently opposed any mobilisation of plantation workers to defeat the frame-up of the Alton Estate workers. Nor have they provided any legal assistance in the courts to those accused by the police. For the past four years, the accused 22 workers have had to make court appearances in Hatton, with the cost of travel, food and legal fees paid out of their own pockets.

The provocations and subsequent witch-hunt against the Alton Estate workers was not an isolated incident. A few months later, 11 workers were victimised and dismissed at the Katukelle Estate in Talawakelle following false accusations. Five workers were sacked from the Velioya Estate near Hatton because they demanded payment subsidies during the COVID-19 pandemic. This pattern clearly indicates a coordinated effort by the estate bosses to suppress the rights of the plantation workforce.

Sri Lankan plantations are major targets in the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity and "economic restructuring" program to be implemented across the country. The former Wickremesinghe government previously announced that it would close down unprofitable estates, diversify cultivation and establish tourist centres in the plantation areas.

Irrespective of the specific plantation restructuring program adopted by President Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People Power government, estate workers are facing massive job cuts and attacks on their conditions.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened at Alton Estate and numerous other plantations to defend the victimised workers and bring this brutal attack to the attention of the international working class.

The SEP initiated the Alton Workers Action Committee (AWAC), explaining to workers the treachery of the CWC and other trade unions, such as the National Union of Workers, Upcountry People's Front and the Democratic Workers Congress, which have formed the Tamil Progressive Alliance.

Plantation workers across Sri Lanka should study the political lessons of the Alton Estate witch-hunt. This experience has further revealed the brutality of the big estate companies, backed by the Colombo government, which are determined to impose the most extreme forms of exploitation.

These attacks, however, could not have been unleashed without the support of the trade union apparatus, which, operating as an

industrial police force, have blocked and betrayed workers' struggles and supported police intimidation.

Functioning as capitalist political parties, the plantation unions align themselves with different sections of the ruling elite, and have been rewarded with ministerial positions in different governments over the past five decades. That is why plantation employees in every estate need to embrace the decision made by Alton workers and form their own action committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracies and capitalist parties, to defend their jobs and win decent wages and working conditions.

Plantation workers need to fight for a living monthly wage with paid medical leave, decent working conditions, housing, hospitals and schools with proper facilities and jobs for all unemployed. All charges must be dropped against the Alton Estate workers and all 38 dismissed workers reinstated with full payment of back wages.

The SEP, the AWAC and other action committees call on workers across Sri Lanka to support the victimised Alton Estate workers, and to link up with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to coordinate their efforts internationally.

Sri Lankan plantation workers are exploited by an international network of giant plantation and export operations like Lipton, Tetley and Twinings. They must reach out to their counterparts in India, Kenya, Malaysia and Vietnam, who endure similar conditions.

The defence of democratic and social rights requires a unified political struggle to overthrow the profit-driven system and for the nationalisation of all key companies, plantations and banks, under the democratic control of workers, as an integral part of the fight for a workers' and peasants' government.



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