

Sri Lankan police file criminal charges against Alton Estate workers

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Sri Lankan police have filed a series of criminal charges against 26 workers from the Alton Estate near Maskeliya in the central plantation district. After dragging out this case for over four years, a charge sheet was issued against the victimised workers on May 28 at the Hatton Magistrate Court. Their case will be heard on September 10.

Seven charges have been laid against the accused. These include, being members of an unlawful assembly with the purpose of attacking estate manager Sathyamoorthy Subash Narayanan and assistant manager Anushan Thiruchelvam; hitting them with hands, feet, and clubs and causing serious injuries; and attacking the estate manager's residence, causing damage estimated at 27,684 rupees (\$US92).

The Alton Estate workers have been indicted under the country's Penal Code and, if convicted, could be sentenced to seven years harsh imprisonment and heavy fines.

Those charged are: Marukku Kankaanamge Chandani, Semban Puwaneswari, Francis Theresa Amma, Munnusamy Yogashakthi, Govindaraj Sathiswari, Kanapathi Devi, Marimuttu Tamil Chelvi, Andimuththu Vishwakethu, Sivaperumal Vikneswaran, Palani Amirthalingam, Kanthaiya Kumuthan, Chidambaram Yogaraj, Kanthaiya Seetha, Thankusamy Pushpawalli, Chandrabose Swarnadevi, Ramalingam Vinothini, Ramachandran Kavithamani, Palaniyandi Selvakumari, Anar Parimala Devi, Dorasamy Thilakavathi, Subramaniyam Sewwandi, Kaleswaram Priyadarshani, Nilamegam Priyadarshani, Muttusamy Wasantha Malar, Parasuraman Muttumari, and Balagamalai Sivakumar.

The Alton Estate workers, who were arrested at the end of February and early March 2021, have strenuously denied the police and manager's allegations. They were among 38 employees who were summarily sacked on the same false accusations on March 22, 2021 by the Horana

Regional Plantations Company (HRPC), which manages the Alton Estate.

The charge sheets for the 26 workers, who speak Tamil as their mother language, was issued in Sinhala. This is a violation of their constitutional and legal rights which say that they must be given all official or legal documents in their mother tongue.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Plantation Workers Action Committee (PWAC) in Sri Lanka declares these workers are class-war victims and demands the dropping of all charges.

The SEP and PWAC call on all estate workers to defend their colleagues from this vicious repression. Workers throughout Sri Lanka must defend their class brothers and sisters and demand the dropping of the frame-up charges and the full reinstatement of all Alton Estate employees with the back-payment of all their wages.

From the outset the plantation trade union bureaucracies—the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), National Workers Union, Democratic Workers Congress, Up-Country People's Front, and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled All Ceylon Estate Workers Union—refused to mobilise their members to defend the victimised Alton Estate workers. They now maintain a criminal silence about the formal police charges, thus expressing their support for this repression.

Why are these workers being hounded by the plantation company and the police, with the backing of the trade union bureaucracies and the blessing of successive Sri Lankan governments?

The Alton Estate workers have been targeted because they were part of determined industrial action four years ago by up to 150,000 plantation workers who were demanding a living wage, better working conditions, and decent housing, education, and health facilities.

This was vehemently opposed by the plantation companies, claiming this would reduce the industry's

competitiveness on the global market. Acting on behalf of all plantation employers, the HRPC is attempting to intimidate all estate workers from fighting for better conditions and to submit to all company demands.

The Alton Estate workers walked out on February 2, 2021, and three days later joined a national strike action involving hundreds of thousands of estate workers to demand a 1,000-rupee (\$5 at 2021 exchange rates) daily wage.

The Alton Estate workers continued their strike until March 29, staging a protest on February 17 outside the manager's residence to demand he stop harassing fellow workers. This incident was seized upon to falsely accuse the workers of attacking the manager and his assistance, and damaging the house.

Police immediately began hunting down workers accused of participating in the protest. Alton Estate workers have accused local CWC bureaucrats of giving police the names of certain workers and asking some to surrender to the police.

The brutal nature of the company's witch hunt was revealed in response to a Hatton Labour Tribunal case lodged against HPC by 13 of the 38 sacked workers, who demanded they be reinstated with back wages.

The judge dismissed the case in January this year, turning it against the complainants themselves. Delivering his judgment in favour of HPC, he ordered the 13 employees to pay 7,500 rupees each to cover the company's legal expenses.

The unprecedented judgment was not challenged by CWC officials who have not made any appeal against it. Judgment in a separate case filed by 17 other sacked workers requesting reinstatement is still pending.

While the JVP/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government came to power promising various social concessions for working people, the repression of the Alton Estate workers continues as does its implementation of the International Monetary Fund's social austerity attacks. This includes the restructuring of the privately managed plantation industry and other key industries.

Plantation companies have begun introducing "revenue-share schemes" under which a certain amount of tea bushes are allocated to workers to maintain them with family assistance, selling the harvest back to the company, with a small portion of the income given back as their share.

This highly exploitative system aims to replace the traditional wage system, abolishes pensions and other basic rights, and transforms workers into modern-day

tenant farmers. This restructuring also includes converting unprofitable estates into agricultural and horticultural projects.

While President Dissanayake declared in his February 17 budget speech that his government would talk to companies about increasing the daily wage to 1,700 rupees, nothing has changed for plantation workers.

This wage proposal, and similar empty promises by previous governments, has been rejected and manipulated by plantation companies who repeatedly complain about high labour costs. Permanent workers are now being paid a daily wage of 1,350 rupees even though the cost-of-living index has nearly doubled since 2022.

HPC's attempts to jail the 26 Alton Estate employees, which is backed by the government and the plantation trade unions, is a serious assault not just on estate workers but the entire working class and must be defeated.

We urge workers to form Workers' Action Committees in every estate, independent organisations democratically controlled workers and that exclude all trade union bureaucrats. These Action Committees must align with the fight to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, aiming to unify their struggles internationally on a socialist program that opposes big business, capitalist governments, and the profit system.

A campaign must be launched to fight for an end to the state witch hunt of the Alton 26. This must be linked to the following demands:

- A monthly wage rise to provide a decent living and indexed to the cost of living
- High quality housing, schools and hospitals
- No to IMF austerity!

The persecution and state repression of Alton Estate workers has once again shown the need to nationalise the big plantation companies, placing them under workers' democratic control. This must be part of the broader struggle of all Sri Lankan workers against the Dissanayake government's IMF austerity measures on the basis of a socialist perspective and for a workers' and peasants' government.



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