

Sri Lankan SEP and estate workers action committee intensifies defence of victimised Alton workers

M. Thevarajah, W.A. Sunil
31 July 2025

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and Alton Estate Workers Action Committee (AEWAC) in Sri Lanka are stepping up their campaign to defend the 26 victimised workers from the Alton Estate in the Maskeliya area of the central plantation district. Police filed criminal charges against the workers on May 28.

The workers were involved in a national plantation strike for higher wages on February 5, 2021. They continued their action at Alton Estate to oppose ongoing harassment by the estate manager. Following a protest near the manager's residence on February 17, 2021, the manager and his assistant complained to the police, claiming that they were physically harmed by workers.

The police arrested dozens of workers, while the Horana Plantation Company (HRPC), which manages the estate, summarily sacked 38 over the same false allegations. Local leaders of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation union, participated in the witch hunt.

The police did not file charges against the 26 workers until May this year, four years after the alleged incident and after repeatedly postponing the case at the Magistrates Court in Hatton.

The hearing of the criminal case against the workers, who have strenuously denied the charges, will begin on September 10. If convicted, the workers could be sentenced to seven years of imprisonment.

The charges include being members of an unlawful assembly with the purpose of attacking estate manager Sathyamoorthy Subash Narayanan and assistant manager Anushan Thiruchelvam; causing serious injuries to these individuals and damaging the estate manager's residence.

SEP and AEWAC members have distributed hundreds of copies of a June 2025 *World Socialist Web Site* article titled "Sri Lankan police file criminal charges against Alton Estate workers" which calls on plantation workers and other sections of the working class to mobilise their strength to defend these class-war victims.

One AEWAC member explained during a recent meeting that a retired worker had told campaigners that, "JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna] trade union people in the estate are telling workers that you [the SEP] are lying, saying those who have been charged will get a seven-year prison sentence."

The worker replied to the JVP supporter: "They [SEP] know very well about the case. They are the people who, from the start and for nearly four years, came here and fought to defend those who were victimised. The union people never came here but always supported management."

AEWAC members later discovered that Bala Kumar, a JVP supporter, had made allegations against the SEP. The JVP is despised by Tamil plantation workers because of its provocative and long-standing denunciation of these workers as "agents" of India and Indian expansionism.

Kumar, who does not work at Alton Estate, played a prominent role organising campaigns for the JVP-led National People's Power (JVP/NPP) in the Maskeliya area during last year's presidential and parliamentary elections. He recently established a branch of the JVP-led All Ceylon Estate Workers Union (ACEWU) with former members of the CWC at Alton Estate.

The JVP and its ACEWU have remained silent about the ongoing harassment of the victimised Alton Estate

workers over the past four years, while the CWC, which has a branch at Alton, has participated in the witch hunt.

Detailed information on the continuing repression of these impoverished plantation workers is well known and widely publicised in dozens of WSWS articles in English, Tamil and Sinhala. The AEWAC and the SEP have held joint meetings at Maskeliya and Hatton and waged an international campaign to defend the Alton Estate workers.

The bogus accusations against the SEP and AEWAC are a crude attempt by the JVP-controlled trade union to sabotage the Alton workers defence campaign. We urge workers to reject these allegations and step up the struggle to defeat this attack on workers' basic democratic right to organise and fight to improve their wages, jobs and working conditions.

The ACEWU, which has little support in the plantations, acts as the political tail-end of the widely discredited union bureaucrats from the CWC, Democratic Workers Congress, Up-Country People's Front, National Union of Workers and a host of other trade unions. The aim of the JVP/CWC union leadership is to hide the political dangers facing the victimised Alton Estate workers and derail the struggle for their defence.

The HRPC, which is a partner of the Hayleys Group, one of Sri Lanka's major conglomerates and top profit earners, is determined to jail the 26 victimised employees. Following the February 17, 2021 protest, it summarily sacked 38 workers without any investigation.

The HRPC is retaining its own lawyers for the forthcoming criminal case as well as in the Labour Tribunal cases filed by sacked employees who are demanding reinstatement and payment of back wages.

Two cases already heard at the Labour Tribunal in Hatton backed the HRPC, ordering 13 workers to pay 7,500 rupees (about \$US25) in legal expenses to the company and 17 others to pay 7,000 rupees.

The Labour Tribunal and Magistrates Court cases have dragged on for over four years since March 2021. During this period, the workers have had to travel to Hatton at least twice every three months, spending money on travel, losing wages on these days and having to pay lawyers out of their pockets. Some have found work in remote estates as casual hands or doing

low paid daily work.

Thirteen of the workers penalised by the Labour Tribunal have collectively filed an appeal in the High Court in Nuwara Eliya, urging a reversal of the Labour Tribunal verdict.

As the SEP and AEWAC explains in its June 25 article, the Alton Estate witch hunt is part an intensifying assault on all plantation workers. This includes the introduction of highly exploitative revenue-share schemes which "aim to replace the traditional wage system, abolish pensions and other basic rights, and transform workers into modern-day tenant farmers. This restructuring also includes converting unprofitable estates into agricultural and horticultural projects...

"HRPC'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."

The SEP and AEWAC calls on workers in Sri Lanka and internationally to defend the victimised Alton Estate workers and support the fight for their immediate and unconditional reinstatement with full back pay.

Workers can only fight for their social and democratic rights as part of a unified political struggle of the working class against the capitalist system and for the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government that nationalises major industries, banks and estates, placing them under the democratic control of the working class.

We appeal to all those who support this struggle to contact us, voice your support, and discuss how you can contribute to this crucial campaign.

Telephone: +94773562327

E-mail: wsWSCmb@sltnet.lk



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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