

Harassment of framed-up Alton Estate workers continues in Sri Lanka

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On September 10, the Hatton Magistrate's Court in Sri Lanka took up the case against 26 framed-up Alton Estate workers. The proceedings were postponed, however, until December 10 because the main witnesses—estate manager Sathyamoorthy Subash Narayanan and assistant manager Anushan Thiruchelvam—failed to appear in court.

Police claimed that they were unable to serve summons because Narayanan's address is unknown and Thiruchelvam is currently abroad. All 26 accused workers, including a mother carrying her newborn infant, were present in court.

The workers are charged with unlawful assembly with the intent to assault Narayanan and Thiruchelvam, causing them serious injuries using hands, feet, and clubs, and damaging the estate manager's residence.

If convicted under Sri Lanka's Penal Code, they face up to seven years in prison and heavy fines. The accused have denied all allegations. Despite Tamil being the workers' mother tongue, the charge sheets were issued in Sinhala, violating their constitutional and legal rights.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Plantation Workers Action Committee (PWAC) urge the workers across Sri Lanka and internationally to redouble their support in defence of the victimised Alton workers.

The ongoing frame-up and persecution started in February 2021 when Alton Estate workers joined a national strike by plantation workers—among the most oppressed sections of the Sri Lankan working class—on February 5, demanding a daily wage of 1,000 rupees (\$US3.30). Alton workers continued industrial action at their estate to protest ongoing management harassment. On February 17, they demonstrated outside the manager's residence—an action the management later used to fabricate criminal allegations.

Between February 17 and March 22, 2021, police arrested 24 workers and two youth from Alton Estate. The Horana Plantation Company (HPC), which manages the estate, summarily dismissed 38 workers—including those arrested—without any official investigation. In April 2021, police charged the workers in the Hatton Magistrate's Court based on these allegations.

On May 28, 2025, the police, after constant delays, formally filed charges—more than four years after the initial arrests—leading to the case being brought to trial on September 10. During these years, the 26 accused workers were repeatedly forced to appear in court, incurring legal costs and suffering ongoing intimidation.

On December 15, 2024, a Maskeliya police officer informed the court that the Attorney General had concluded there was insufficient evidence to prosecute the workers for damaging the manager's residence. Despite this, the magistrate postponed the case, giving police more time to frame new charges.

On January 9, 2025, a Hatton Labour Tribunal judge dismissed a case filed by 14 of the dismissed workers seeking reinstatement and back wages. The judge then ordered 13 of the workers to pay 7,500 rupees each (about \$US25) to HPC for legal costs. The workers have since appealed to the High Court.

The protracted victimisation and persecution of the Alton Estate workers by HPC and state authorities could not have occurred without the overt and covert backing of the plantation trade union bureaucracies.

The Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), the main plantation union, actively collaborated with the police by providing names of protesting workers and directing some to surrender. While the CWC acknowledged that the Labour Tribunal ruling went “against the workers,”

it refused to mount a legal appeal.

Other unions—including the Up-country People’s Front, National Union of Workers, Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, and the All-Ceylon Estate Workers Union, which is controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), have remained silent, tacitly supporting the repression.

The prolonged legal proceedings and mass dismissals have created severe hardships. Workers have been forced to travel 11 to 20 kilometres from Maskeliya to Hatton for court appearances, spending around 4,000 rupees each time on transport and legal fees. Many of the sacked workers have only been able to find irregular or low-paid casual work. The financial strain has affected their families, with some unable to send their children to school.

The persecution of the Alton Estate workers is part of a broader crackdown on workers resisting government attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions. Plantation companies bitterly opposed the mass strike action in early 2021 and rejected workers’ demands for a 1,000-rupee daily wage, arguing it would undermine Sri Lankan competitiveness in the global market.

The repression of Alton Estate workers is also directly linked to International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated austerity measures and the “economic restructuring” program now being implemented by President Dissanayake’s JVP-led National People’s Power government.

These measures include the dismantling of some estates, diversifying cultivation, and the introduction of a “revenue-share model” (RSM).

Under the RSM, workers are allocated a set number of tea bushes to maintain and harvest and are only paid after company expenses and profits are deducted. This model effectively abolishes fixed wages, pensions, and other basic rights, turning estate workers into modern-day tenant farmers.

Successive governments and union leaders have supported these attacks.

The SEP and the PWAC from the outset have consistently fought to defend the Alton Estate workers, launching national and international campaigns in defence of the victimised workers and exposing the disinformation spread by HPC, backed by trade union leaders, the police and the state.

The SEP and PWAC demand the immediate

withdrawal of all charges and the unconditional reinstatement of all dismissed workers with full back wages.

As part of this campaign, a petition addressed to the Attorney General has garnered over 500 signatures from workers across various sectors and students both in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Public meetings have been held, and the SEP and PWAC have disseminated information via the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) in English, Tamil, and Sinhala. Letters and emails of solidarity have also been sent to Sri Lankan authorities from around the world.

The defence of the Alton Estate workers is inseparably linked to the fight for a living monthly wage indexed to the cost of living, quality housing, education, healthcare, and employment for all. These demands are part of a socialist program, including the nationalisation of key companies, plantations, and banks under the democratic control of the working class and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government.



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