

Brutal police attack claims 17 lives in southern India

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On July 23 a brutal police attack on a procession of workers, family members and supporters in Tirunelveli in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu claimed 17 lives.

The procession was organised in support of the struggle of workers at a tea estate in Manjolai in the Tirunelveli district. Seventeen victims, including two women and a two-year-old boy, were drowned in the Thamiraparani river where they ran to escape the police, who attacked the workers with lathis—long batons—and stones. An additional 15 persons were severely injured.

The tea workers struck on June 8 and again on July 23, holding demonstrations each time to protest their conditions of labour. On July 23 the police set upon the marchers from all directions, leaving demonstrators nowhere to run other than the river.

The procession was on its way to the District Collectorate—equivalent to a District Secretariat or Government Agent's Office—to hand over a petition to the District Collector demanding an early solution to long-pending wage disputes in the Manjolai tea estate, and the release of 652 workers who were jailed following the June 8 demonstration in front of the Collectorate.

They also called on the state government to take over the tea estate from the present owner, the Bombay Burmah Trading Company. The procession was led by S. Balakrishnan, a member of the Tamil Manila Congress (TMC) and leader of the opposition in the Tamil Nadu State Assembly, along with Dr. Krishnaswamy, president of Puthiya Thamizhagam (New Tamil Union) and local leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). Puthiya Thamizhagam (PT) is a caste-based party centred on the Dalits—the former "untouchables" of India.

Among the dead were Rathina Mary, 30, and two-year-old Vignesh, the wife and son of Mariappan, a plantation worker in Manjolai estate who was jailed after the June 8 incident. Among the injured was V. Palani, district secretary of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)], who received serious head injuries. Two media persons, S. Ramalingam of *Sun TV*, and Antony Xavier, a photographer for the Tamil daily *Dinamani*, were also injured and received in-patient treatment at the medical college hospital.

In addition to charging the workers with lathis and firing two rounds in the air, the police pelted the marchers with stones and bricks. As two writers from the Indian magazine *Frontline* commented, the police "indiscriminately used a new weapon in their armoury—stones and bricks". According to the August 3 *Frontline* article, S. Balakrishnan said, "It is something unheard of: policemen pelting people with stones".

An estimated 5,000 people participated in the July 23 procession. The leaders had obtained prior police permission for the procession to march to the Collectorate. About 700 personnel from the Swift Action Force (SAF), the men's and women's companies of the Tamil Nadu Special Police (TSP), the Striking Force, the Armed Reserve Police and local police had been mobilised for the attack.

The police sealed off all the entry points to the Collectorate in advance of the procession. They halted the march about 50 meters from the main gate of the Collectorate. The leaders, who were riding in an open jeep, drove to the front and pleaded with the police officers for permission to go onto the Collectorate premises so they could hand over the petition.

Their request was rejected by Shylesh Kumar Yadav, the Deputy Commissioner of Police. While the discussion between the leaders and the police officers was in progress, a section of the procession made its way to the banks of the nearby Thamiraparani river and tried from that route to reach the main gate. They also began to raise slogans demanding their leaders be allowed onto the Collectorate premises.

The SAF tried to chase away the crowd, using force. That action provoked some people to throw stones at the police. The action of police provocateurs planted among the crowd cannot be completely ruled out. The police team began to throw stones and bricks into the crowd, launched a lathi-charge and fired two rounds into the air.

Hundreds of panic-stricken men and women ran into the riverbed. The police continued the lathi-charge and stone-throwing, chasing the fleeing people. People jumped into the river and tried to cross it. But the policemen also jumped into the water and struck the heads of men and women mercilessly. As a result, some women, men and children drowned.

The police even attacked even those who tried to rescue the drowning workers. Some policemen also crossed to the

opposite bank of the river and continued their attack.

The journalists covering the event, Ramalingam, Abdul Hameed, Arulraj and Murugan, managed to rescue four women from drowning, but had to withdraw after being confronted by the police. Antony Xavier of the *Dinamani* newspaper was assaulted by the police while he was filming other men from the media attempting to rescue the drowning women. The police damaged his camera and threw the film into the river.

The police attack has intensified growing anger against the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) state government. The DMK leaders, concerned about their fate in general elections to be held in September and October, attempted to dampen the general outrage. The state government, led by Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, immediately appointed K. Karthikeyan, a retired district judge, as an one-man commission to inquire into the matter, and withdrew the cases against the jailed 652 Manjolai tea estate workers, who were in Tiruchi central prison. That led to their release on July 28.

In a statement made on July 27, Chief Minister Karunanidhi charged that the marchers turned to violence and tried to forcibly enter the Collectorate. This was a crude effort to blame the workers for the July 23 massacre.

Karunanidhi also attempted to belittle the Manjolai estate workers' demands, claiming that all the problems of the workers, except their demand related to "half a day's wage", had already been resolved. What the workers demanded was the withdrawal of a 50 percent cut in their daily wages, which management had imposed over the past four months as a penalty.

The state government lost no time completing its post-mortem on the people killed in the police attack, and the bodies were buried by the government under tight security on July 28, just five days after their deaths. The relatives of the dead refused to accept the bodies. The post-mortem verdict was that the death of all the victims had been caused by "asphyxia" following drowning.

The statement of the Chief Minister and the way the officials conducted their inquiries showed that the state government was attempting to cover up the role played by its civil and police officials in organising the massacre in Tirunelveli on July 23.

The TMC, PT and Stalinist CPI (M) and CPI, which led the workers' procession on July 23, are doing nothing more than making appeals to the same state government that is seeking to justify the police attack. The TMC and PT initially demanded that the DMK government re-open the postmortem on the dead, and bring in doctors outside of Tamil Nadu state. They also called for the suspension of the District Collector in Tirunelveli and all the police personnel on duty that day, as well as a judicial inquiry by a sitting judge of the Chennai (State capital) High Court.

They warned that they would hold a fast in front of the Chennai Secretariat on July 28 if their three demands were not met by the evening of July 26. But when the DMK government

appointed a retired Supreme Court judge, S. Mohan, in the place of the retired district judge to probe the incident, while rejecting completely the demands for the suspension of officers and a new postmortem, the TMC and PT withdrew their planned fast, welcoming the change and saying they were only "awaiting a positive response" from the government to their demands. Later, when it became clear the DMK government had no intention of granting further concessions, the TMC-led four party coalition, to which the PT also is affiliated, held a state-wide fast on July 31 "in support of the Manjolai tea estate workers".

The CPI (M) state committee has demanded action against the district Collector and the senior police officers for the July 23 incident and more compensation to the families of the deceased. It held a state-wide agitation for those demands on July 30. At a joint protest meeting with the CPI held in Tirunelveli on that day, CPI (M) State Secretariat member A. Soundararajan said his party rejected the inquiry commission headed by retired justice S. Mohan and demanded an inquiry by a sitting judge of the Madras High Court. But their ally, the CPI, welcomed the Justice Mohan commission.

The brutal nature of the July 23 police attack is a clear indication of how the basic democratic rights of the masses have been severely suppressed by the ruling classes in India. Here the governing party in Tamil Nadu, the DMK, can surely count on the support of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led central government, because the DMK is now a member of the alliance led by the BJP, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The DMK at an earlier point was allied with the TMC; both were in the United Front-Left Front, which ruled the country before the BJP-led government took office in 1998.

But in the confidence vote faced by the BJP-led government last April 29, the DMK broke ranks to vote with the BJP. At that point the former allies, the DMK and the TMC, became enemies. For their part, the TMC and their allies, including the PT, are seeking to utilise the Tirunelveli incident to gain an opportunistic advantage in the upcoming general elections.



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