

Impact of Hungary's toxic mud disaster

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In October, Hungary experienced the worst environmental disaster in the country's recent history. Nearly two months later, it is clear that no one in the world of politics or business is prepared to take responsibility for what happened, and the people have been left to face the devastating consequences.

Nine people died and 120 were injured, some seriously, when the walls of a reservoir gave way October 4, unleashing a flood of toxic waste from the aluminium producer MAL, located near the western Hungarian city of Ajka. In the days that followed, 1 million to 1.5 million cubic metres of red sludge containing heavy metals escaped, flooding parts of the towns of Kolontar, Devecser and Somlovasrhely.

The red mud spread over a total area of 40 square kilometres and got into the Danube via the rivers Torn and Marcal. On October 5, an emergency was proclaimed in the districts of Veszprem, Vas and Gyor-Moson-Sopron. Kolontar was evacuated by the disaster control authority on October 9.

It is not yet possible to calculate the long-term damage to people and the environment. Environmental group Greenpeace took samples of the red sludge in Kolontar on October 5, and sent them for analysis at the Vienna Federal Environmental Agency. Calculations give rise to an estimate of the total quantities spilled as follows: 50 tonnes of arsenic, 300 tonnes of chromium and 550 kilograms of mercury. Persistent rainfall means that some of these toxins have contaminated the drinking water supply.

Although it was immediately clear that the accident was attributable to the systematic neglect of basic safety standards, the company responsible for the reservoir stated that all legal requirements had been met. The company's management also claimed that the red mud contained no toxins and was safe.

The measures taken against the operators of MAL were merely an attempt to calm an enraged population.

From the beginning, the right-wing Fidesz government of Prime Minister Victor Orban tried to protect the company and to systematically deceive the people of the region.

The government immediately set up a special web site, but has neither commented on the serious environmental impact nor addressed the cause of the disaster. After a few days, Orban ordered that sampling could only be undertaken with official permission. This was to prevent concrete figures coming to light about the dangers facing the population.

On October 15, MAL was able to restart production. A second temporary dam had been built, but this does not provide reliable protection against similar incidents. At the same time, the evacuated residents were able to return to their devastated homes, even though the state of emergency is officially in place until the end of the year.

The emergency was imposed only long enough to prevent protests from developing among the victims of the disaster who have so far not received any compensation. Any such protests were banned by the police with reference to the ongoing state of emergency.

Under pressure from the government, which controls the public TV and radio broadcasters, daily coverage of the disaster was ended in mid-October.

Zoltan Bakonyi, MAL plant director, was taken into police custody for questioning for a short while, but was soon released. It is still questionable whether he or the management of MAL will ever face a trial, let alone a conviction.

The so-called "Lex MAL", by which parliament took the company into state administration, is being used to take the company out of the line of fire and to secure the profits of shareholders with government help.

The government fully supports the ludicrous offers of compensation from MAL. Although conservative

estimates now place damage totals at around €70 million, MAL is only offering a total of about €5 million to be paid to the victims, spread over five years.

The opposition Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) immediately defended the company. The party chair, Attila Mesterhazy, said that the plant was too important an employer to be closed down, and demanded the immediate continuation of business.

This is hardly surprising. The MSZP, which emerged from Hungary's former state Communist Party, has produced the likes of former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany, who ruthlessly sold off the former state-owned enterprises, becoming personally wealthy in the process. The privatisation of MAL was brought about by these former Stalinist functionaries.

In the mid-1990s, the MSZP formed the government, and the father of the current plant director, a close friend of Gyurcsany, was chair of the company, which was then state-owned. Through the privatisation, he and Gyurcsany acquired holdings in the aluminium producer.

Thanks to these close links, it was not a problem for the company to simply buy the official certificates it needed to show it was running the business properly. Under the present Fidesz government, the plant licence was renewed in September.

Both Fidesz and the MSZP are closely associated with the leading business circles that have made their fortunes on the backs of ordinary people, following the collapse of the Stalinist regime 20 years ago. They employ the same ruthlessness today, burdening the population with the consequences of their capitalist politics. Disasters such as those in Ajka can only be prevented if working people wrest power away from this corrupt and greedy elite.



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