

Sri Lankan SEP announces workers' inquiry into Weliveriya water pollution

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is launching a workers' inquiry into the pollution of the local water supply by the Venigros Dipped Products Company in Sri Lanka's Western Province.

On August 1, the government ordered the military and police to suppress ongoing protests by villagers from Weliveriya over water pollution. Two students and a young worker were killed in the crackdown and dozens of others were injured.

The killings provoked widespread public outrage, forcing the government to promise investigations into the high acidity levels in the local ground water and establish a military court of inquiry into the deaths. These are nothing but a sham designed to deflect public anger, buy time for the Venigros Company and cover up for the security forces.

In August, President Mahinda Rajapakse told local villagers that the Government Analyst would test the local water supplies. Defence secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse promised that a committee of experts drawn from government bodies, including the Industrial Technology Institute (ITI), would analyse water samples.

The ITI announced that it found high levels of acidity in the water where the factory is located, but has not disclosed the source. Not a single report has been made public.

As for the army's court of inquiry, its outcome is already clear. Individual officers and soldiers are being singled out as scapegoats in order to whitewash the role of the government in ordering the August 1 violence.

In opposition to these cover ups, the SEP is convening a workers' inquiry to examine the following:

* The Venigros Company's pollution of the local water supply and the dangers posed to the health of

villagers and workers.

* The exploitative working conditions facing workers in the company's factory.

* Who was responsible for the August 1 killings.

* The solution to the scourge of industrial pollution that endangers the health of workers and residents alike.

The SEP has formed an inquiry committee to collect oral and written evidence and will carry out its own investigations. We call on workers and villagers, as well as scientific and technical experts and anyone with knowledge of these issues, to come forward.

The SEP specifically appeals to Venigros workers and Weliveriya residents to reject all attempts to drive a wedge between them.

Venigros and its subsidiaries, Royal Enterprises and Olga Enterprises, have shut their factories amid the protests. About 600 contract workers have not received their wages since August and some 60 permanent workers are only receiving their basic salary.

The government and the company are seeking to whip up hostility against the villagers, blaming them for the threat to workers' jobs. But it is the Venigros company, aided and abetted by the government, that refuses to take any action to halt the water pollution.

The company treats local residents and its workforce alike with contempt. Its factory, which produces non-medical rubber gloves, emits about 15,000 litres of waste water every day. Inside the plant, most workers are employed on contract at low wages. In March, Venigros sacked some 120 workers for forming a union in a bid to improve wages and conditions.

Yet the company is reaping huge profits. Pre-tax profits for the financial year to March 2012 were 2.38 billion rupees, a three-fold rise over the previous year. The trend continued in 2012-13, with a pre-tax profit of

2.1 billion rupees.

Rajapakse's government is hell-bent on protecting the Venigros Company. As the worsening global crisis of capitalism impacts on Sri Lanka, the government wants to send a signal to big business and foreign investors that it is ready to do anything to defend their interests. The military crackdown on August 1 was a warning that the repressive methods developed during 26 years of civil war will be used to crush any resistance by working people.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) has latched onto the Weliweriya protests to boost its chances in provincial elections scheduled for early next year. It is being assisted by its pseudo-left allies—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP)—that promote this rightwing capitalist party as a defender of democracy and ordinary working people.

In the Weliweriya area, the UNP, NSSP and Siyane Water Protection Movement (SWPM), headed by a local UNP councillor, are organising meetings confined to the most parochial demand—to shift the factory to another area where it can damage the health of other residents and workers.

The water pollution at Weliweriya is just the tip of the iceberg. On October 9, a burst chlorine pipeline from a tank owned by a government institution resulted in the hospitalisation of hundreds of plantation workers at Avissawella. On October 21, nearly 350 villagers were affected by an ammonia leak from the S&D factory at Kesbawa.

Industrial pollution affects the lives of working people around the world. Cases are frequently reported in countries like China, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, which are major cheap labour platforms for global corporations. It is the product of a social order that subordinates all the basic needs of working people to the relentless drive for profit.

The establishment of a workers' inquiry to expose the operations of the Venigros Company, in league with the Rajapakse government, will be an important first step in the fight to end industrial pollution and guarantee decent jobs and living standards for all. The SEP calls on workers, villagers, students, young people and professionals to take part in the campaign to build the inquiry.



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