

Workers' Inquiry on Weliweriya water pollution

Venigros owners demand reopening of Sri Lankan factory

Vilani Peiris

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Owners of Venigros Dipped Products in Sri Lanka told a Colombo press conference last month that they must be allowed to reopen their Weliweriya plant. The factory was forced to close four months ago, following widespread concerns that it was polluting local ground water. The company has threatened to move its production facilities to Malaysia if the Rajapakse government does not intervene and create the conditions for the factory to resume production.

The press conference, held on November 19, was attended by Mohan Pandithage, CEO of the Hayleys Group, which owns Venigros, Dipped Products managing director Mahesh Ranasoma, and several other people, including local economists who back the company.

On August 1, the military, deployed by the Rajapakse government, opened fire on thousands of protestors who were demanding the factory be removed from the area. Two students and a young worker from the nearby Biyagama free trade zone were killed and about 30 others injured.

Facing deep-seated popular opposition, the government, in order to buy time, assigned several government authorities, including the Government Analyst and the Industrial Technology Institute (ITI), to test the local ground water. Their reports have yet to be published.

Ranasoma claimed that the factory closure had already caused the loss of about one billion rupees in export earnings. Dipped Products earns 250-300 million rupees per month. Reiterating the importance of the plant to big business and the Sri Lankan government, Ranasoma said that non-medical glove products were exported to 70 countries from Sri Lanka.

“Dipped Products’ global market, which was built with great effort over 36 years, is declining by the day,” he stated.

Ranasoma denied any company responsibility for pollution by selectively citing reports from the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) and the Water Supply and Drainage Board (Water Board). He quoted from the CEA report, which stated: “It is not possible to establish that treated effluent from the factory has influenced low pH in wells.” The Water Board investigation, according to Ranasoma, said: “There is no clear evidence to show that the low pH of the area is due to factory effluent.”

These delayed reports, however, have not been publicly released, and the cited quotes are not in any way conclusive.

Ranasoma feigned concern for the fate of laid-off plant employees and said that the closure had affected the incomes of up to 25,000 workers, including rubber tappers. Venigros’ principal concern is profit, not the health and well-being of workers and local residents. The company fired 120 workers early this year, after they formed a trade union at the plant.

Sri Lankan economist Indrajith Coomaraswamy told the press conference that the plant was not responsible for any local pollution. The factory had to be reopened, he continued, or it would send a “negative” signal to investors at a time when foreign direct investment into Sri Lanka was desperately needed.

Hayleys CEO Pandithage demanded an immediate discussion with President Rajapakse and his brother, Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse. “The buildings are available in Malaysia,” he declared, “and all we have to do is to load our machinery into

containers, ship them to that country, install the plant and plug on. But I am a nationalist. I don't want to do that except as a last resort."

Pandithage's concern is the loss of Sri Lanka's position as a cheap labour platform. Venigros workers are highly exploited, paid low wages and mainly employed on a contract basis. Dipped Products' profits increased more than threefold in 2011, to 2.38 billion rupees. In the first quarter of 2013, the company's pre-tax profits increased by 41 percent.

In response to a journalist's question, Ranasoma claimed that Hayleys and Venigros were prepared to provide piped water to residents living within a kilometre of the factory.

The Rajapakse government's reluctance to allow Dipped Products to resume production at this stage is not out of any concern for the health of workers and residents. It fears that if the factory is reopened in the face of widespread local opposition it will impact on its prospects in the Western Provincial Council elections to be held early next year.

No one should have any doubt about the government's intentions. It operates according to the requirements of big business and international finance capital, and, as the August 1 attack on demonstrators made clear, will ruthlessly employ against any opposition the military forces built up in the 26-year war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

On November 20, the Siyane Water Protection Organisation (SWPO), led by opposition United National Party (UNP) provincial councillor Pramitha Hettiarachchi, held a press conference in response to the Venigros Dipped Products briefing. Hettiarachchi declared that his organisation would conduct "every [form of] struggle that can be carried out within the framework of law."

The UNP, with the active support of the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party, which is part of the SWPO, is cynically exploiting the popular opposition in an attempt to maximise its vote base.

The building of the Independent Workers' Inquiry called by Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is critical and the only way the truth will be revealed about the operations of the Dipped Products plant in Weliveriya. The inquiry, which will collect oral and written evidence and conduct its own investigations, will examine the following issues:

* 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 called for the support of workers, villagers, scientists, technologists and others with knowledge about these issues to participate in this investigation. (See: "Sri Lankan SEP announces workers' inquiry into Weliveriya water pollution")

For further details, please contact us through following address and telephone numbers.

The Independent Workers' Inquiry Committee on Weliveriya Water Pollution,
716 1/1, Kotte Road,
Ethulkotte, Kotte
Phone: 2869239/3096987



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact