

Sri Lanka: Support grows for workers' inquiry into Weliweriya water pollution

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The independent workers' inquiry launched by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) into the water pollution from the Venigros Dipped Products Factory at Weliweriya in the Gampaha district, has attracted support from local residents and workers, including some who were injured when the army opened fire on protesters four months ago.

Two students and a young worker were shot dead, and many people were wounded, when President Mahinda Rajapakse's government deployed police and the army to crush a demonstration on this issue on August 1. Residents were demanding the closure of the factory because its wastewater has increased the acidity level in their water supply, causing serious health problems.

The government, the opposition parties and the media are seeking to contain and suppress the popular opposition and also cover up the exploitative conditions of workers in the factory. The SEP launched the workers' inquiry to establish the truth about the water contamination, determine who was responsible for the August 1 shootings and address the wider scourge of industrial pollution. (See: "Sri Lankan SEP announces workers' inquiry into Weliweriya water pollution")

Residents participated in a discussion with the Independent Workers Inquiry Committee (WIC) held at the Sanasa Hall, Miriswatte in Gampaha on December 1.

Jude, a three-wheel taxi driver who was injured by the army, explained what happened on August 1. He said soldiers started shooting without even giving the demonstrators any opportunity to disperse. "The army first chased away journalists," he said. "The brigadier who commanded the battalion warned people to disperse. We agreed and requested half an hour to do so. Then the brigadier received a phone call. Suddenly

the firing started. It was evening. First, they shot at power lines. Then the whole area became dark."

Like Jude, Mervyn Royal, who was severely beaten, concluded that the order to shoot people came from the top. Royal, who was listed as a witness at the official inquiry into the shootings, held at the Gampaha courts, said he was not satisfied with that inquiry.

Royal pointed out that the soldiers were not called to testify, despite earlier statements that they would be. "I was prepared to disprove the army version of the incident," he said, "but my evidence was not taken." He said the inquiry was manipulated to prevent eyewitnesses, like himself, giving evidence.

Jude commented that "our own inquiry" is required because all the water test reports produced by government institutions were false documents produced on behalf of the factory. "I think that we can understand what actually takes place through this independent inquiry," he said.

Jude said the Venigros company was taking steps to sabotage the popular protest. Those injured in the army shooting, including himself, were given 25,000 rupees (about \$US190) each and asked not to give details to the press and to allow the factory to reopen.

The company also invited villagers to a discussion and asked them to agree to the factory reopening. It promised to "give jobs to the area's youth and to start English and computer classes for students if people agreed to reopen," Jude said. Residents rejected all these handouts, however.

Jude also criticised the Siyane Water Protection Movement's (SWPM) request to relocate the factory to another area. Jude asked whether people of that area would agree to it.

The SWPM is led by an opposition United National Party (UNP) provincial councillor. The UNP is trying

to exploit the anger among people for electoral purposes. The pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party is helping the UNP and SWPM campaign. They demand the factory's relocation, knowing full well that it would cause similar pollution problems for people in any other area.

At the WIC meeting, two youth initially said the company helped injured people and there was not enough evidence to prove that water was polluted by the factory's effluent. Their views showed the impact of concerted propaganda by the company, the government and the media to sow confusion. They accepted the need for an independent inquiry, however, after it was explained by WIC members.

WIC members pointed out the contradictory character of the water test reports filed at the Gampaha magistrates court on August 21. Residents also presented to the court a copy of a 1997 Central Environmental Authority (CEA) report on the Venigros factory. It said the factory had operated without a proper water treatment system since it started in 1996, and further noted: "Also it has been proved that waste water generated by this industry has been put into the external environment."

The CEA added that although some minor changes were made to the existing treatment system, seasonal analyses showed that the quality of wastewater was incompatible with relevant standards. The report advised the factory management to stop adding wastewater to the area's drainage system.

A further CEA report, produced in August 2012, was presented to the court. It contained no detail about whether the treatment system had been properly improved or not.

A former factory worker told SEP members that the factory's daily wastewater output was about 40,000 litres but only a portion went through the treatment system.

Test reports by both the CEA and the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (Water Board) accept that groundwater in the area is acidic but claim there is no evidence to prove the factory is responsible. The CEA concedes that nitrate and sulphate ions can be emitted through the factory's wastewater but asserts that the level of ion concentration is not harmful to people's health.

The residents, however, say they are facing health

problems caused by the factory's wastewater. A man who worked at the factory for 11 years said most children suffered rashes after bathing.

A Venigros worker explained how chemicals are emitted from the factory. "The area's water is polluted because the chemicals are put out after being mixed with water ... Using a land master tractor, ash is taken out four times a day. But after being mixed with water, this ash causes itching."

L. D. Premawathie, who underwent surgery two months ago due to a stone forming in her urinal system, said her son also had similar surgery. Now her family brought drinking water from about 5 kilometres away.

This evidence, provided by ordinary people, shows the importance of an independent workers' inquiry. We urge workers, youth and others, including scientists and technologists, to come forward to assist the inquiry in establishing the truth.

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